

## THE FINAL DESTINY OF THE INCORRIGIBLY WICKED

The teaching that the wicked will suffer eternal torment would require that the wicked be immortal. As noted in Study 1 humans do not have an immaterial soul which lives on after death. Furthermore, it is only the righteous ones who will be granted immortality:

- ❖ "...to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and **immortality**, eternal life" (*Rom. 9:7*).

### DEATH IS THE PUNISHMENT FOR SIN

- ❖ "The wages of sin is death (*Rom. 6:23*).
- ❖ "The soul who sins shall die" (*Ezek. 18:4*).

### ONLY TWO FINAL DESTINIES

Jesus consistently made it clear that humans will experience one or the other of only two final destinies; and he illustrated it in the following way when he admonished people to:

- ❖ "Enter through the *narrow gate*; for the gate is wide and *the way is broad* that leads **to destruction**, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads **to life**, and there are few who find it" (*Matt. 7:13-14*).

This biblical picture demonstrates that there is no eternal torment for the wicked and that the resurrection of the unrighteous is to be universal. However, while it is also true that God wants everyone to be saved, yet He recognizes the fact that many will not finally respond even though He will exercise His patience, justice and love to the greatest extent possible for everyone to have their complete opportunity.

### DIRECT STATEMENTS OF DESTRUCTION OF THE WICKED

Nevertheless, the Scriptures present us with many statements concerning the failure of the incorrigibly wicked to attain salvation and hence to finally suffer their own destruction. For example:

- ❖ "...though *the wicked* sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to **destruction forever**" (*Ps. 92:7*).
- ❖ "These will pay the penalty of **eternal destruction**" (*2 Thess. 1:9, 10*).
- ❖ "And do not be afraid of those who **kill the body** but not the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna" (*Matt. 10:28 NAB*).

*The contrast here shows that humans can deprive a person of life temporarily but God can do so permanently — a judicial death. Why would Jesus give this warning if the destruction were not real and permanent?*

### FURTHER STATEMENTS OF DESTRUCTION

Psalm 9:5, 73:18, 19, 145:20; Proverb. 10:29; Matthew 7:13; Rom. 9:22; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 3; and 2 Peter 2:12 are all statements showing the future permanent destruction of the incorrigibly wicked. Also both *Psalms 9:5 and 92:7* show that the wicked will have their names "**blotted out forever**" because "they are doomed to **destruction forever**." This fact, therefore, contradicts any idea that the

*destruction is only temporary.* So Theologian John Stott remarked that:

It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and ... it is 'difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing.' It cannot, I think, be replied that it is impossible to destroy human beings because they are immortal, for the immortality – and therefore indestructibility – of the soul is a Greek and not a Biblical concept. According to Scripture only God possesses immortality in himself (1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16); he reveals and gives it to us through the gospel (2 Tim. 1:10). *Essentials: A Liberal –Evangelical Dialogue*, p. 315.

## THE PARABLES OF DESTRUCTION

- ❖ “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but **the chaff** he will **burn with unquenchable fire**” (*Matt. 3:12*).
- ❖ “Gather *the weeds* first and bind them in bundles to be **burned** ... So, just as the weeds are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age” (*Matt. 13:30b, 40*).
- ❖ “...he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats ... Then he will say to those *on his left*, ‘Depart from me, you cursed into the **eternal fire** prepared for the devil and his angels ... and these [*the goats*] will go away into **eternal** (Gk *aionios*) **punishment** (Lit. *lopping off*)” (*Matt. 25:32, 41, 46*).

*This is not an eternal punishing as a process, but a punishment of destruction*, the result of which lasts through the age to come which is why the word *aionios* is used. *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, St. Matthew* (p. 196) states with reference to Matthew 25:46 that: “The adjective *aionios* means belonging to a future age. It does not of itself mean ‘unending.’”

- ❖ “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and *all evildoers* **will be stubble**. The day that is coming shall **set them ablaze**, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will *leave them neither root nor branch* ... And you shall tread down *the wicked*, for they shall **be ashes** under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts” (*Mal. 4:1, 3*).
- ❖ “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that **will consume** the enemies of God” (*Heb. 10:26, 27*).

Furthermore, Jesus illustrates the destruction of the wicked at the end of the age by reference to the destruction of the wicked both during the Flood and the Sodom and Gomorrah event.

## FIRE AS SYMBOLIC OF THE TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF THE WICKED

It is a mistaken view to state that fire, as used symbolically in the Bible, is only for the purifying of individuals and is not also concerning destruction. The point of using fire as a symbol is that, depending on the materials put to the fire, it generally destroys — it is all consuming.

- ❖ “And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was hurled into the **lake of fire**” (*Rev. 20:11-15*).
- ❖ “But *rebels and sinners* shall be broken together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be **consumed**” (*Isa. 1:28*).

*Any torment of a living person who is thrown into a literal fire would only be for a moment.* Yet, Luke 12:5 shows that it is not living beings that are thrown into the lake of fire. However, there is one exception, which is that of the beast and the false prophet “these two were thrown **alive** into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur” (*Rev 19:20*). This seems to denote **some degree of conscious punishment**

**that precedes the extinction.** However, it is not eternal as we shall see later. Nevertheless, all of this is simple imagery and is associated with other imagery of destruction such as the pouring out of the “*unmixed wine*” of God’s fury in full strength to bring about destruction (Rev.14:10; 16:19).

THE FIERY GEHENNA, THE LAKE OF FIRE AND THE FURNACE  
ARE SYMBOLIC OF THE SECOND DEATH

The Greek word *Gehenna* occurs only 11 times in the synoptic gospels and once in the Letter of James. It is formed from the Hebrew *Geh. Hinnom* which means “*Valley of Hinnom*” where the waste from the City of Jerusalem, dead animal carcasses, and the dead bodies of executed criminals, were all disposed of by burning. Most likely with reference to Isaiah 66:24, Jesus used *Gehenna* to symbolize destruction as in the following instances taken from the NAB. So Jesus says:

- ❖ “...whoever says, ‘you fool’ will be liable to the **fiery Gehenna**” (*Matt. 5:22b*).
- ❖ “...be afraid of the one who can **destroy** both soul and body **in Gehenna**” (*Matt. 10:28*).
- ❖ “You brood of vipers, how can you flee from the **judgment of Gehenna**” (*Matt. 23:33*).

Synonymous with his use of the word *Gehenna* Jesus spoke of “the fiery furnace” and “the lake that burns with fire and sulphur” in terms of destruction of the wicked:

- ❖ “So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate **the evil** from the righteous and throw them into the **fiery furnace...**” (*Matt. 13:49, 50*).
- ❖ “But as for the cowards...their portion will be in **the lake that burns with fire** and sulphur, which is **the second death**” (*Rev. 21:8*).

*The fact that “the lake that burns with fire and sulphur” is defined as “the second death” shows that it is concerned with the terminating of life and not to do with purifying of Christians i.e. a kind of purgatory.* Rather this is a death beyond that of ordinary death from which there will be resurrection.

THE HIGHLY SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF DESTRUCTION

1. “The lake of fire” is a symbol of “the second death” because it is defined as such. If the first death is a **cessation of life** then so too must the second death be a cessation of life—only permanently so. This is simple imagery and is associated with **other imagery of destruction**. Indeed, in being an eternal death it is the antithesis of ‘eternal life.’

2. The *Gehenna* situation occurs after the wicked are already dead. Jesus warned:

- ❖ “Be afraid of the one who *after killing* has the power to **cast into Gehenna**” (*Luke 12:5*).

*There are a number of texts which seem to indicate that the wicked are killed by means of the fire.* However, the statement that it is **after** God has killed a wicked individual that he/she is “**cast into Gehenna**” indicates that *Gehenna* is representative of something more than ordinary death. It seems therefore that *Gehenna* symbolizes the permanence of that death.

3. Also the fact that, in Revelation 20:14, the two *personifications* of the abstract realities Death and Hades are shown as thrown into the lake of fire indicates that it is not a literal fire but rather that it is a symbol of second death.

OTHER SYMBOLS OF DESTRUCTION

THE CUP OF GOD’S WRATH

This OT symbol often describes the extinction of those who are made to drink from such a cup. Being full-strength guarantees the destruction of those who drink from it. This symbol is again used in the NT as **the pouring out of the “unmixed wine” of God’s fury in full strength to bring about**

**destruction** (*Rev.14:10; 16:19*). No doubt, there will be extreme suffering as these worshippers experience the “*cup of God’s wrath*” being poured out on them. But this does not refer to conscious torment after they die because “*the dead know nothing*” (*Eccl. 9:5*).

#### **BURNING SULPHUR HURLED DOWN**

This is not the same as the “gehenna” and “lake of fire” symbols. Jesus used this symbol when referring to the destruction of *Sodom and Gomorrah*.

#### **THE GREAT FLOOD**

Jesus further illustrated the destruction of the wicked by reference to the destruction of the wicked in Noah’s time. However, this does not mean that the future destruction will be by a literal flood but rather it is merely a symbol of such future destruction.

### NO PLACE OF ETERNAL TORMENT

Similar to Ezekiel’s vision of the burying of those who rebelled against God in the end-times (38, 39), Isaiah see the bodies of these dead rebels and describes their destruction in terms of everlasting fire:

- ❖ “And they shall go out and see **the corpses** of the men who have rebelled against me; their **worm shall not die**, and their **fire shall not be extinguished**, and they shall be abhorrent to all mankind” (*Isa. 66:24*).

Now in speaking of these dead bodies this verse is describing their decomposition, and therefore destruction, which is hastened by **worms** that do not die until completing their work. The **fire** is unquenched until it has fully consumed the remains of those bodies. These two methods therefore speak of the total destruction of dead bodies and not of an eternal torture of immaterial souls. This sets the picture for John the Baptist’s statement in Matthew 3:12 that: “*the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*” as meaning that the fire cannot be prevented from completing its work of destruction. Jesus also makes a similar statement:

- ❖ “Better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into *Gehenna*, where their **worm does not die** and the **fire is not quenched**” (*Mark 9:47, 48*).

#### *WHY IS THE FIRE ETERNAL?*

- ❖ “Depart from me, you cursed, into the **eternal fire** prepared for the devil and his angels ... And these will go away into **eternal punishment**” (*Matt. 25:41, 46*).

*This is similar to the “eternal sin” (Mark 3:29) as being sin that has permanent consequences and not sin that is endlessly committed. Furthermore, the cities of:*

- ❖ “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns...serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of **eternal fire**” (*Jude 7*).

*This group of cities were permanently destroyed by fire; the results of the fire being permanent.* However, the individuals were not permanently tormented in a fire. This was *not an eternal punishing* but a punishment. The Greek word translated as punishment is *kolasis* which according to Moulton and Milligan refers to the lopping/pruning of trees.

#### *THROWN INTO THE OUTER DARKNESS*

Rather than describing an eternal conscious agony as traditionally taught, the context of these sayings give a picture of expulsion, exclusion, rejection and annihilation at the final judgement.

COMPLETE DESTRUCTION OCCURS ONLY ON  
TWO OCCASIONS

1. AT CHRIST'S RETURN

*THE LIVING WICKED ARE DESTROYED*

- ❖ “And *the beast* was seized, and with him *the false prophet*...these two were thrown *alive* into **the lake of fire** which burns with brimstone” (Rev. 19:20).
- ❖ “...the harvest is *the end of the age* ... The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks, and *those who commit lawlessness*, and will throw them into **the furnace of fire**...” (Matt. 13:39, 41).

2. AT THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM

*THE LIVING WICKED ARE DESTROYED*

- ❖ “And they [*Gog and Magog — the rebellious nations*] marched over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but **fire** came down from heaven and **consumed them**, and *the devil* who had deceived them was thrown into **the lake of fire** and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:9, 10).

*THE RESURRECTED WICKED ARE DESTROYED*

- ❖ “And the sea gave up *the dead* who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, ... Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire ... And if anyone’s name was *not found written in the book of life*, he was thrown into **the lake of fire**” (Rev. 20:13-15).

When “*Death and Hades [are] thrown into the lake of fire*” all death will have come to an end. However, there is no biblical statement that **anyone ever gets out of the lake of fire** as is the case with the first death — by means of resurrection.

UNDERSTANDING PASSAGES WHICH APPEAR TO TEACH  
ETERNAL TORMENT IN HELL FOR THE WICKED

**Revelation 14:9-11** (NET):

“A third angel followed the first two, declaring in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast or his image, and takes the mark on his forehead or his hand, that person will also drink of the wine of God’s anger that has been mixed undiluted in the cup of his wrath, and **he will be tortured with fire and sulfur in front of the holy angels and in front of the Lamb**. And the **smoke from their torture will go up forever** and ever, and those who worship the beast and his image will **have no rest day or night**, along with anyone who receives the mark of his name.’”

*This passage is generally applied out of context and is interpreted without taking into account the fact that John’s Revelation is a book containing many symbolisms.* For instance, the description in Revelation 13:1 of the beast is of one with “seven heads and ten horns coming out the sea.” This is clearly a symbol and no one would be deceived if such were a literal animal. So it is only common sense to consider whether or not the “torture, smoke, fire and brimstone” might not also be symbols.

Furthermore, the general interpretations of the passage fail to take into account the plain statements in other parts of the Scriptures which never promote the concept of eternal torture or torment of the wicked.

*THE TIMING AND LOCATION OF THIS EVENT*

Because, this passage concerns those who worship and take the mark of the beast, the setting is of “the time of the end” during the Great Tribulation. So the location for this torture “**with fire and**

**sulphur**” is shown to be on earth; and so the wicked cannot be in hell. Furthermore, in Revelation 14:12 we learn that: *“This requires the steadfast endurance of the saints — those who obey God’s commandments and hold to their faith in Jesus”* (NET). John writes this in the Greek *present* tense. So it occurs at the same time that the wicked are worshiping the beast, having taken his mark and are having “no rest day or night.” So this further emphasizes the fact that their being “tortured with fire and sulphur” will happen on earth and near the time of the Great Tribulation. *Also the fact that this being “tortured with fire and sulfur in front of the holy angels and in front of the Lamb”* may be a reference to the judgment of the nations by Jesus shortly after his return.

#### THE SMOKE RISING FOREVER

The *torment* is not described as lasting forever. However, it is **the smoke** that rises forever and ever. So is this a literal or a symbolic picture? Evidently this is the same fire, sulphur and smoke imagery used to describe the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah when: *“[Abraham] looked out toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of that region. As he did so, he saw the smoke rising up from the land like smoke from a furnace”* (Gen. 19:28). This imagery was later used with reference to **the destruction of Edom**:

- ❖ “Edom’s streams shall be changed into pitch and her earth into **sulphur**, and her land shall become **burning pitch**; *night and day it shall not be quenched*, its **smoke shall rise forever**. From generation to generation she shall **lie waste**, never again shall anyone pass through her”  
(Isa. 34:9, 10).

Edom itself was destroyed long ago, and so the flames went out and no smoke rises from it today. So clearly the smoke rising ‘forever’ is figurative/symbolic language to show that the destruction of Edom will be remembered forever. It is the same with the passages in the book of Revelation which, therefore, symbolize permanent i.e. eternal destruction. This is consistent with the usage of such language in the rest of the Scriptures. So it is the **permanent evidence or memorial** that the fire of God’s punishment has completed its work of destruction. Similar imagery is noted with reference the city “Babylon the great” where she is destroyed by fire:

- ❖ “Fallen is Babylon the great...she will be consumed by fire...**Smoke** will rise from her *forever and ever*” (Rev. 18:2, 8 and 19:3).

*Clearly Babylon does not literally go on burning forever, but God’s people will never forget His destruction of that city, which is what is meant by smoke rising forever.*

#### “NO REST DAY OR NIGHT”

As shown by the fact that John writes this in the Greek *present* tense, the phrase *“they have no rest day or night”* denotes the continuity of the burning process, giving no rest, until it is completed. It parallels the phrase concerning Edom the *“night and day it shall not be quenched,”* and shows that the torment is not limited to the night time only or the daytime only but to both.

#### WHAT WILL THE TORTURE BE?

Revelation 16:2 describes such a time of torture for the wicked:

- ❖ “So the first angel went and poured out his bowl **on the earth**. Then ugly and painful sores appeared on the people who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped his image” (NET).

*So these are all living people who are “on the earth.” Furthermore, Jesus had earlier illustrated in Luke 19:27 what will happen to his enemies:*

- ❖ “But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be their king, bring them here and **slaughter them** in front of me!”

*So, at the time of God’s wrath, following the Great Tribulation, these ones will be slaughtered in front of the King so that they are no longer conscious.*

Also the passage in Isaiah 34 shows that Edom will not have people in it: “never again shall anyone

- ❖ “pass through her” indicates as a parallel that the Revelation passage does not concern a place of literal eternal torture.

*THE ‘ETERNAL TORMENT’ TEACHING DIRECTLY CONTRADICTS THE SCRIPTURES*

- ❖ The lake is defined as “the second death” which means the permanent cessation of life. The false concept of literal ‘eternal torment’ would mean that the wicked are granted immortal life, whereas the Scriptures state that:
- ❖ “The wicked **will be no more** ... The wicked will **perish**...they vanish — like smoke they vanish away” (*Ps. 37:10, 20*).
- ❖ “All the wicked he will destroy” (*Ps. 145:20*).
- ❖ “...though *the wicked* sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to **destruction forever**” (*Ps. 92:7*).

God has never countenanced torture and is, in fact, very strongly against it (*Jer. 7:31*). Yet He has no reason to preserve alive any who are not in harmony with Him. Also because the Revelation 14 scenario takes place “*in front of the holy angels and in front of the Lamb*” it is clear that it will also be in front of “the body of Christ;” and yet Christians are promised “no more sorrow” (*Rev 21:3*). How could they not be distraught if they were literally seeing the wicked writhing in agony forever.

***Revelation 20:10*** (*NIV*):

“And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be **tormented day and night for ever** and ever.”

This is the only reference in the entire Bible to eternal torment. First of all, notice that this verse doesn’t speak only of Satan as the one who will be “tormented day and night.” It says “they” to include all the incorrigibly wicked. These ones are not granted immortality — a reward granted only to faithful Christians. This means that Satan, in being thrown into the same place also has no immortality and so cannot be tortured for eternity. So again the meaning of this scenario must be symbolic. In fact, this passage in Revelation 20:10 is still making the same point as Revelation 14, except that “the lake of burning sulphur” has the focus rather than the smoke and so the picture of ‘eternal torment’ is symbolic and demonstrates the permanent and irreversible annihilation of Satan. As with all the wicked he will be subjected to “the second death” — destroyed forever as shown in the above Scriptures. This will be his permanent cessation of life, rather than his being granted immortal life.

CONCLUSION

So none of the wicked, including Satan and his demons, will be preserved alive to suffer eternal conscious torment. As noted earlier the symbolic nature of “the lake of fire” is seen in the fact that it is defined as “the second death” Also, in Revelation 20:14, the two *personifications* of the abstract realities or conditions of Adamic Death and Hades are destroyed in it. And so “the lake of fire” must symbolize destruction, rather than being a literal place of torment.

Such destruction is the fate of the incorrigibly wicked, in the first instance, of the living wicked who, at the time of Christ’s return, reject him and his kingdom, and then finally, shortly after the Millennium, of the living wicked and the resurrected ones who prove themselves to be wicked also by their rejection of God’s arrangement.

With these thoughts in mind we shall examine the teaching called Universalism in the next study. This proposes that no one gets destroyed or suffers eternal torment.

SUGGESTED READING

*The Fire that Consumes* by Edward Fudge.

Immortality or Resurrection? by Samuele Bacciocchi.

See Chapter 6. Hell: Eternal Torment or Annihilation?

*By Raymond C. Faircloth*  
[www.biblicaltruthseekers.co.uk](http://www.biblicaltruthseekers.co.uk)

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