

# The Fate of the Wicked

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Following on from last week, we will be using this issue as a case study, or test bed, for how to investigate what the Bible teaches on an issue and how to determine the best interpretation among competing “hermeneutic circles”.

**Three views** (1) Traditionalism: souls are immortal and the unsaved will be tormented forever; (2) Universalism: souls are immortal, the unsaved will be refined and restored; (3) Conditionalism: souls are mortal, the saved will be given immortality and the unsaved will be destroyed.

**Old Testament teaching about the fate of the wicked** About 50 different verbs and 70 different figures of speech referring to the fate of the wicked. They will be like:

- A vessel broken in pieces (Ps 2:9)
- Ashes trodden underfoot (Mal 4:3)
- Smoke that vanishes (Ps 37:20)
- Chaff carried away by the wind (Ps 1:4)
- A slug that dissolves (Ps 58:8)
- Straw that is burned (Is 1:31)
- Thorns and stubble in the fire (Is 33:12)
- Wax that melts (Ps 68:2)
- A dream that vanishes (Ps 73:20)
- . . . and many more

These are not literal, but the images must mean *something*. The idea that God will miraculously keep them alive and torture them forever is a concept or image never mentioned anywhere in the OT.

**Apocrypha** Apart from a single reference in Judith 16:17, all references are to total destruction. (Note: by the time of Judith, Greek philosophy, with the concept of the immortality of the soul, had already begun to influence some Jewish thinking.)

**Pseudepographa** material presents a wide variety of views including both the traditional view and total destruction.

**Dead Sea Scrolls:** (currently about 800 available) the consistent picture is of total destruction.

**Rabbinical literature:** (including Talmud and Mishnah) includes all three views.

## New Testament references

- “Unquenchable fire” (Mt 3:10–12, Mt 7:19 Mk 9:43, Luke 3:17 etc.) “Unquenchable fire” is fire which cannot be extinguished until it has totally consumed whatever is being burned.
- Destruction (Mt 7:13–14, Rom 9:22, Phil 3:19, 2 Thess 1:9, 2 Peter 3:7, Rev 17:8, 11)
- “Weeping and gnashing of teeth”. Weeping is a symbol of misery and grief: part of the “fearful expectation of judgement” (Heb 10:27). In every reference in the OT, “gnashing teeth” means anger and rage of the evil against the upright, eg Ps 112:10 “The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.”
- “Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt 10:28)
- Perishing (Lk 13:3, Jn 3:16, Jn 10:28, Rom 1:18, 2:6)
- Eternal destruction (2 Thess 1:9) and eternal punishment (Mat 25:46). Compare with: eternal judgement (Heb 6:2), eternal redemption (Heb 12:9), eternal salvation (Heb 5:9) and eternal sin (Mk 3:29). In each case of “eternal” (aionios) with an act or process, there is a single act in time which is followed by a result that lasts forever (not a process that goes on forever). Eg “eternal destruction” means the abolition and extinction of the person forever.
- God alone has immortality (1 Tim 6:16). Immortality is not inherent in humans, it is a gift for the saved: (Jn 3:16,36, 5:39, 6:40,47, Rom 2:7, 6:22-23, 1 Cor 15:42,50-54, 1 Peter 1:4, 2 Tim 1:10) (compare “traditional traditionalists” who follow Plato with “modern traditionalists”)
- God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28), God will “reconcile to himself all things” (Col 1:19-20), “he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more,” (Rev 21:4). These verses are consistent with Universalism (although the others above are not), but are very hard to reconcile with the eternal conscious torment of the wicked.
- The “lake of fire” which is the “second death” (Rev 20:6,10,14–15, 21:8)

## The Moral argument

Any finite amount of pain extended for an infinite time is an infinite punishment for a finite sin: which is unjust. God as creator is of course perfectly justified in doing anything He likes to His creation: including torturing them everlastingly. But God claims to treat us with justice and claims that His justice is clear and understandable (cf Lk 12:57, Ps 119).