

Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth

Many people today have been conditioned so that when they hear the words “weeping and gnashing of teeth” they imagine people writhing in pain and unendurable agony, and the phrase is often used as a popular proof-text to support the “common biblical description of hell.”

The idea that weeping and gnashing of teeth represents never-ending torture has been reinforced by numerous books, preachers, and torment-peddling tracts for some time. But that is not how the phrase is used by the Authorized Bible.

Here is a well-recognized passage from our King James Version that uses the phrase in question, simply stating that when the children of the kingdom are cast out, there shall be weeping and “gnashing of teeth.”

(Mat 8:12 KJV) But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and **gnashing of teeth**.

The word “weeping” is usually well understood, so we shall instead examine the phrase “gnashing of teeth.” If we let scripture interpret scripture, we can easily find out the intended meaning of a phrase by searching out how it was used by our translators. “Gnash” and “teeth” are used together in only 14 instances:

- 2 instances of gnash (see Psa 112:10, Lam 2:16)
- 3 instances of gnasheth (see Job 16:9, Psa 37:12, Mar 9:18)
- 2 instances of gnashed (see Psa 35:16, Act 7:54)
- 7 instances of gnashing (see Mat 8:12, Mat 13:42, Mat 13:50, Mat 22:13, Mat 24:51, Mat 25:30, Luk 13:28)

If we allow the bible to interpret itself, “gnashing of teeth” expresses viciousness, anger, rage, or hateful words with the intent to slander, insult, blaspheme, or destroy. Even looking at its first instance in our biblical text, this is the plain, simple, and obvious meaning.

(Job 16:9 KJV) He teareth *me* in his wrath, who hateth me: **he gnasheth upon me with his teeth**; mine enemy sharpeneth his eyes upon me.

Its usage also remains consistent throughout the Psalms.

(Psa 35:16 KJV) With hypocritical mockers in feasts, **they gnashed upon me with their teeth**.

(Psa 37:12 KJV) The wicked plotteth against the just, **and gnasheth upon him with his teeth**.

By the time we reach its fourth usage, it has become easy to recognize the exact passage which Christ was referencing in Matthew, when he said the wicked would be cast out, and that there would be weeping and “gnashing of teeth.” This is its true usage, and this is our biblical definition:

(Psa 112:10 KJV) The wicked shall see *it*, and be grieved; **he shall gnash with his teeth, and melt away**: the desire of the wicked shall perish.

Here in the Psalms, it says that the wicked shall be grieved, and that he shall gnash with his teeth, and melt away. Are these the words of never-ending torture, pains, eternal conscious misery, or unfulfilled never-satiated desires?

Gnashing of teeth is paired with grief, and it says the wicked shall melt away, and that their desire shall perish. These are words fitting utter destruction, annihilation, and ultimate extinction, appropriately described as “outer darkness.”

We can only assume that Christ was aware of the source of this term, and its meaning within its original context. We cannot assume that Christ would take a phrase from a well known passage and apply it with a completely opposite meaning. The phrase continues to be cited consistently in the New Testament, which shall be demonstrated as well.

(Luk 13:28 KJV) **There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth**, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you *yourselves* thrust out.

Clearly, “weeping and gnashing of teeth” would be the expected reaction when the wicked Pharisees see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God... when they see themselves thrust out.

Please note that there is no reference to “darkness” in this passage: the gnashing is a reaction to God’s judgment, and an expression of disbelief, wailing, pleading, resentment, and anger. They will cry that it is “unfair” because they are the real children of Abraham, and claim that their deeds were “righteous” and that they should not be denied their birthright.

There are three more styles of this phrase used within the New Testament, but none of them would seem to represent “unending pain and agony.”

Mat 24:50-51 KJV

(50) The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for *him*, and in an hour that he is not aware of,

(51) And shall cut him asunder, and appoint *him* his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**.

In this parable, the lord comes suddenly against his evil servant, but there are no hints that this judgment is compatible with the concept of eternal conscious torment. When someone is “**cut asunder**” they do not live very long – they may die from shock within mere moments. It is not a slow death or an agonizing torture. When Samuel “**hewed Agag in pieces**” this was a swift execution, not a prolonged torture (see 1 Samuel 15:32-33.)

(Mar 9:18 KJV) And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and **gnasheth with his teeth**, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not.

The context of this verse does not indicate that pain had a normal effect on this man. Rather, quite the opposite: he inflicted harm upon himself and foamed at the mouth, and threw himself into fire and water in spite of bodily harm. He may have wailed, or screamed, or even bit people or chewed on objects, all of which would qualify as symptoms of possession of a “deaf and dumb” spirit.

(Act 7:54 KJV) When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they **gnashed on him with their teeth**.

For our final example, when Steven spoke to the Sanhedrin he did not literally cut their hearts with a knife, and they did not literally chew on him with their teeth. The Sanhedrin was not writhing in intense pain and agony – but they did lash out against Steven with their tongues. Typically when the bible speaks of gnashing of teeth, teeth are gnashed against an object of hatred or resentment.

Modern Translations of “Gnashing of Teeth”

In all, the testimony of our Authorized Text is consistent in its meaning, and easily understood if it is allowed to interpret itself. However, it seems that many modern English translations have taken liberties with this passage, adding slight modifications to insert an entirely different meaning. Below, I will quote the same passage of Matthew 8:12 from the New International Version (NIV), the New American Standard Version (NASB), and the New Living Translation (NLT).

(Matthew 8:12 NIV) But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, **where** there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(Matthew 8:12 NASB) ... but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; **in that place** there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth”

(Matthew 8:12 NLT) But many Israelites – those for whom the Kingdom was prepared – will be cast into outer darkness, **where** there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Simply adding **one prepositional phrase** has changed the entire meaning.

The “outer darkness” of our KJV was a plain and simple description of death, the utter cessation of thought, consciousness, and being, the end result of being “cast out” into a furnace (Matthew 13:42,50) which, by the way, was a well recognized method of execution (see Daniel chapter 3, entire chapter.)

Death has also been referred to as “the land of darkness” (Job 10:21-22), as having gone “down into silence” (Psalms 115:17), “the mist of darkness” (2 Peter 2:17) and “the blackness of darkness” (Jude 1:13) – not a place of perpetual conversation, chatter, weeping, wailing, crying, or cursing.

Job 3:17-18 KJV

(17) There the wicked cease *from* troubling; and **there the weary be at rest.**
(18) *There* the prisoners rest together; **they hear not the voice of the oppressor.**

Job 10:21-22 KJV

(21) Before I go *whence* I shall not return, *even* to **the land of darkness** and the shadow of death;
(22) **A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and** of the shadow of death, without any order, and *where* the light *is* as darkness.

Psa 115:17 KJV

(17) The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that **go down into silence.**

2Pe 2:17 KJV

(17) These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom **the mist of darkness is reserved for ever.**

Jud 1:13 KJV

(13) Raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved **the blackness of darkness for ever.**

But according to these modern translations, the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is no longer a reaction to when they see themselves “thrust out” (Luke 13:28) but instead transforms “outer darkness” from a state of extinction into a special location for weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The American Standard Version of 1901 performs a similar trick, but in a much more subtle fashion. Instead of adding a prepositional phrase, it has instead added **a direct article.**

(Matthew 8:12 ASV, 1901) but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast forth into the outer darkness: there shall be **the** weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

Now, with this tiny three letter word “**the**” this verse no longer declares that weeping and gnashing of teeth shall occur, but instead says that outer darkness is the location of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The History of Matthew 8:12

More recent translations even go so far as to abandon the illusion of a word-for-word translation entirely. I have heard paraphrase Bibles change this verse until it reads as “...where there shall be eternal pain and torment.” There is little point in even claiming to use the Bible for doctrine when such drastic changes can be made by a careless paraphrase fueled by a pre-existing doctrinal bias.

Now, I do believe that our English King James Bible is preserved both pure and perfect, but I thought it might help to emphasize that this particular modification of Matthew 8:12 that interprets “outer darkness” as a place of perpetual pain and anguish is a recent modification of the scriptures that has taken hold in this last century. The English Bibles of the Protestant Reformation took no such liberties.

(Matthew 8:12 Wycliffe, 14th century) but the sones of the rewme schulen be cast out in to vtmer derknessis; **there schal be** wepyng, and grynting of teeth.

(Matthew 8:12 Tyndale, 1525) and the chyldren of ye kyngdome shalbe cast out in to vtter darcknes: **there shalbe** wepinge and gnashing of tethe.

(Matthew 8:12 Bishops, 1568) But the chyldren of the kyngdome shalbe caste out, into vtter darcknesse: **there shalbe** wepyng, and gnashyng of teeth.

(Matthew 8:12 Geneva, 1587) And the children of the kingdome shall be cast out into vtter darkenes: **there shalbe** weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(Matthew 8:12 KJV, 1611) But the children of the kingdome shall be cast out into outer darkenesse: **there shalbe** weeping and gnashing of teeth

(Matthew 8:12, KJV, 1769) But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: **there shall be** weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Even the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible of 1609 states “there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” in agreement with the tradition of the King James. I hope this emphasizes that the “eternal conscious torment” modification of these verses not only twists phrases like “gnashing of teeth” beyond their intended meaning, but they are also a relatively recent modification.

In Conclusion

One last time, I would quote the Authorized Version in context:

Psa 112:10 KJV

(10) The wicked shall see *it*, **and be grieved; he shall gnash with his teeth, and melt away**: the desire of the wicked shall perish.

Mat 8:11-12 KJV

- (11) And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.
- (12) But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: **there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

I think it helps to remember that Jesus had a pretty good knowledge of the Old Testament, thus we should not be shocked when we find that his words made frequent allusions to the Hebrew scripture. In context, the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” means the wicked shall be grieved, and melt away, and their desire shall perish.

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Concerning “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” this is only one example that I have found where modern versions have been edited to add support to the noxious “Eternal Conscious Torment” doctrine. Scripturally, God promises that the wicked shall be destroyed at the end of the world, that they shall be consumed, and reduced to ashes, and that they shall be no more. This language represents the end result of execution by fire [death] - not of life in never ending torture.

As we have seen, the Bible uses “gnashing of teeth” in quite a different way than a modern-day torment-peddling Chick tract. The phrase means anger, resentment, slander, viciousness, hatred, and blasphemy – usually spoken from the mouth and delivered by the tongue. In that day, when He says “depart from me, ye that work iniquity,” there will most certainly be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Mat 7:22-23 KJV

- (22) Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?
- (23) And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

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Mal 4:1-3 KJV

- (1) For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh **shall burn them up**, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.
- (2) But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.
- (3) And ye shall tread down the wicked; **for they shall be ashes** under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do *this*, saith the LORD of hosts.

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