Appendix 5. Annihilation in the Lake of Fire

Through the years many people have had difficulty believing that God would torture people eternally, and for a number of important reasons. For one thing, it is not logical that someone could commit sin in one short lifetime that would be justly recompensed by being tormented forever. How can that be just, righteous, or loving? Furthermore, it makes the saved people seem very cold-hearted. Can it really be that the saved are rejoicing forever while hearing the screams of people being tortured forever? Remember, in Jesus’ teaching in Luke 16:24 the rich man in torment could actually converse with Abraham. And frankly, even if the saved could not hear the cries of the damned, would that make such a big difference? Civilized people will not even torture their worst enemies here on earth, does that change when the saved are perfected? The teaching that unsaved people are tormented forever contradicts many clear and simple scriptures.

Revelation 20:10 contains the figure of speech hyperbole (pronounced hī-per’-bō-lee), an exaggeration or overstatement of the truth. The reality is that the Devil, his demons, and some extremely evil people, will burn in the lake of fire for a very, very long time before dying and being consumed and annihilated, but they will not be tormented “forever” (“hyperbole” will be covered in more detail below).

One of the best known principles of biblical exegesis is that God’s Word is internally consistent, i.e., verses cannot contradict each other. If verses appear to contradict, any unclear verse must be interpreted in harmony with the clear verses on the subject. The Bible says in many different ways and in many places that the unsaved will be totally destroyed. In contrast, there are only a few verses that seem to say the unsaved will not be destroyed. Thus we can safely conclude that the unsaved will be destroyed. Furthermore, when we closely examine the few verses that seem to say the unsaved will burn forever, each of them can be explained from grammar or customs in a way that is consistent with the clear verses.

1. The Old Testament says the wicked will be destroyed.

When studying whether the wicked are annihilated or live forever in torment, the most natural place to start is in the Old Testament. When we read it, we see that it says over and over in many different ways that the wicked will be annihilated and be gone forever. They will:

- “be no more” (Ps. 37:10; Prov. 10:25)
- “be forever destroyed” (Ps. 92:7; cp. Ps. 73:17-19; cp. Ps.145:20; Prov. 13:13 KJV)
- “die” (Ezek. 18:4, 20; 33:13-16)
- “perish” (Ps. 1:6; 37:20; Isa. 41:11)
- “perish forever (Job 20:7)
- “be as nothing” (Isa. 41:12)
- have “everlasting ruin” (Ps. 52:5)
The Old Testament also says that moths will eat them up like a garment, and worms devour them like they devour wool (Isaiah 51:8), which are both illustrations showing nothing will be left of them. It also says that wicked people will fly away like a dream and be found no more (Job 20:8). They will “be consumed like dry stubble” (Nahum 1:10; cp. Isa. 29:20); and will “vanish like smoke” (Ps. 37:20) because “his [God’s] fire will consume them” (Ps. 21:9). No one will see them any more (Job 20:9).

The illustrations in the above verses do not portray eternal torment, but total destruction. And there is even more support for annihilation of the wicked than what we have just seen. Notice the way Malachi refers to the future of the wicked.

**Malachi 4:1**

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them.”

Like the other Old Testament verses we have seen, Malachi does not give us a picture of eternal torment, but of total destruction. Nothing, not one root or branch, will be left to the wicked, which means they will be totally consumed, totally gone. Later on in Malachi, the same picture of total destruction is put a different way: “[the wicked] will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things” (Mal. 4:3). The wicked are not pictured as being tortured forever, but eventually will become “ashes.”

Still another way God portrays the destruction of the wicked is by saying they will be “cut off.” The phrase “cut off” is used in several different ways in the Old Testament. It is used of physical death (1 Sam. 24:21; 1 Kings 18:4; Isa. 53:8; thus some versions have “killed”), and it is also used of people who will be “cut off” in the next life (Ps. 12:3; 37:9, 22; Nahum 1:15). Just as when a person was cut off in his first life and ceased to live, so when he is cut off after the Judgment he will cease to live, and then cannot “live” in torment. In contrast to these clear verses that say the wicked will be destroyed and be no more, there is not one clear Old Testament verse that shows the wicked living forever in torment.

2. **The New Testament says the wicked will be destroyed.**

Having now seen more than a dozen different ways the Old Testament says that wicked people will eventually be destroyed and cease to exist, we will see that the New Testament continues the same idea, saying that the wicked are totally consumed and become non-existent.

John the Baptist compared the wicked with chaff that is burned (Matt. 3:12). Jesus compared the unsaved to trees that do not produce fruit and so are cut down and burned (Matt. 7:19); to weeds that are gathered and burned (Matt. 13:40); and to vine branches that do not produce fruit and so are cut off and burned (John 15:6). None of these illustrations give the impression that the burning lasts forever. Instead, they all convey the simple truth that was well known in the biblical culture: chaff, weeds, or wood that is thrown into a fire burn for a short time and then are completely consumed. If John or Jesus knew that people burned forever in the lake of fire, they should have used illustrations that made that point, or added some comments to make their illustration clear. However, it surely seems that John and Jesus both knew exactly what their
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illustrations conveyed—the total destruction of the wicked—and chose their illustrations on purpose to make that exact point and fit with the rest of Scripture. Just as the chaff, weeds, or wood, burn for a time in the fire and then are consumed and gone forever, the wicked suffer some retribution in the lake of fire and then die and are burned up completely.

Another New Testament illustration that teaches the ungodly will be destroyed is the comparison of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to the destruction of the wicked. The book of 2 Peter says that God, “by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly” (2 Pet. 2:6 ESV). Sodom and Gomorrah were not tormented forever, but burned to ashes and became “extinct,” and that is exactly what will happen to wicked people.

3. **The vocabulary of the New Testament shows us the wicked will be destroyed.**

As well as illustrations and comparisons about the destruction of the unsaved such as those we have seen above with trees, weeds, or Sodom and Gomorrah, the New Testament uses more than half a dozen Greek words to describe what will happen to the unsaved, and they each refer to death and destruction, not continued life in torment. If we are going to arrive at the true meaning of Scripture, we must pay careful attention to the vocabulary it uses because God chooses His vocabulary carefully. When it comes to the total annihilation of the wicked, God uses many different Greek words to make the point again and again that the wicked will be destroyed.

The best way to study this subject is by studying the individual Greek words themselves. For one thing, usually a Greek word will be translated as several different English words depending on the context. For another thing, different Greek words will sometimes be translated by the same English word. This makes trying to do biblical research by studying the English words confusing and can lead to false conclusions. For example, *apollumi* is translated “destroy,” “perish,” “lose,” etc., depending on the context, but there are also other Greek words (cp. *apōleia* and *olethros*) that are sometimes translated “destruction.” If we follow the Greeks words and understand their meanings, we can arrive at truth no matter how the translators brought the Greek into English. Below is a list of Greek words God uses to portray the destruction of the wicked.

1. **Apōleia** (Strong’s #684 ἀπώλεια). *Apōleia* means “the destruction that one experiences; annihilation” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, by Arndt and Gingrich; abbreviated BDAG). Jesus said that the road is narrow and the gate small that leads to “life,” while the broad road and broad gate leads to “destruction” (Matt. 7:13, 14; *apōleia*). Philippians 3:19 and 2 Peter 3:7 say the end of ungodly men and the enemies of God is “destruction,” and Romans 9:22 speaks of vessels (i.e., people) prepared for “destruction.” Hebrews 10:39 (KJV) says that believing results in the “saving of the soul,” while unbelief results in “destruction,” i.e., annihilation. To contrast *apōleia* with other words that mean destruction or total destruction, perhaps “annihilation” would be a clear translation. So *apōleia* is just one word that shows us the end of the unsaved is annihilation, not eternal torment.
Something that will help us understand that most of the words in this study, like *apōleia* (destruction) refer to total annihilation is to remember that some words are inherently telic (they have an endpoint), while other words are inherently atelic (they do not have an endpoint). Words like “torture,” “pain,” and “suffering” are atelic; the words themselves do not have an endpoint. Torture and suffering may go on a minute, a month, a year, or forever. The vocabulary word itself does not have an inherent boundary—it may go on forever. In contrast, words such as “destruction,” “annihilation,” and “extinction” are telic, they have an inherent endpoint. If nothing is ever finally destroyed, then what happened was not “destruction.” The same is true with “annihilation.” If in the end nothing is “annihilated,” then the process was not “annihilation.” Similarly “extinction” is not “extinction” if in the end something is not “extinct.” It is important to understand the difference between telic and atelic words because the vocabulary God uses when it comes to the wicked is telic. They are destroyed, annihilated, and extinct. They no longer exist.

A closing comment on *apōleia* is appropriate: We should pay attention to the fact that Jesus contrasted “life” with “destruction” (Matt. 7:13, 14). That clearly implies that “life” is not “destruction,” that is, those who are alive are not destroyed, and those who are destroyed are not alive. Jesus did not say that there was “life” for both the good and wicked, and the only difference between them was the quality of their life (joy or torment). We contend that Jesus chose his words carefully and accurately, and taught the great truth that the wicked are annihilated in the lake of fire.

2. *Apollumi* (Strong’s #622 ἀπόλλυμι). *Apollumi* means “to cause or experience destruction” (BDAG). The Gospel of Matthew says that we are to fear God, who is the one who can “destroy both soul and body” in Gehenna (Matt. 10:28), and John 3:16, using the same Greek word, says that the unsaved will “perish,” but those who believe will have everlasting life. Romans 2:12 also says the unsaved will “perish.” These verses give more evidence that the fate of the wicked is everlasting destruction, not everlasting torment.

3. *Esthiō* (Strong’s #2068 ἐσθιῶ; in some lexicons it is listed as the unused root, *phagō*, Strong’s #5315 φάγω). *Esthiō* means “eat,” and thus by extension it also came to mean “to do away with completely; consume; devour” (BDAG). James 5:3, speaking of wicked people, says their gold and silver will “eat *esthiō*; consume your flesh like fire,” meaning that the greed and possessions of the wicked will be the cause of them being consumed after the Judgment. Hebrews 10:27 speaks of a “fire that will consume [*esthiō*] the enemies of God.” Hebrews 12:29 says God is a “consuming fire,” but in this verse the Greek word for “consuming” is *katanaliskō* (Strong’s #2654 καταναλίσκω), which means “consume” (BDAG), to do away with completely. That is exactly what fire does to things, it burns them up until they are totally consumed. The translation of Hebrews 10:27 in many versions, that a fire will “consume” the enemies of God is simple, clear, and accurate. There is no “eternal torment,” but there is everlasting death, the unsaved are consumed in the lake of fire.

4. *Exolethreuō* (Strong’s #1842 ἐξολεθρεύω). This is an amplification of *olethros* (2 Thess. 1:9) below, and means to destroy completely. Peter used it in Acts 3:23 (quoting Deut. 18:19) to show that anyone who did not listen to the prophet who was foretold to come (i.e., the Messiah), would be completely destroyed and not be part of
the people of God. *Exolethreuō* is used frequently (over 200 times) in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was made around 250 BC, and it sometimes refers to a person’s destruction in this life, and sometimes refers to their complete destruction in the next. That is certainly the way Peter used it in Acts 3:23, and an example of the total and everlasting destruction of the wicked is Psalm 37:9.

5. *Katastrophē* (Strong’s #2692 καταστροφή). 2 Peter 2:6 says that God reduced Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes as an example of what would happen to ungodly people. Some Greek texts include the word *katastrophē*, which means “condition of total destruction” (BDAG), which is why the ESV reads that God “condemned them to extinction…” The ESV has chosen a good English word, “extinction,” to separate *katastrophē* from other Greek words that mean destruction. “Extinction” exactly describes the fate of the unsaved, they are not tormented forever.

6. *Olethros* (Strong’s #3639 ὀλέθρος). *Olethros* means “a state of destruction, destruction, ruin, death” (BDAG). 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says that people who do not obey God will be punished with everlasting “destruction” [οιλεθρός]. Perhaps simply to distinguish *olethros* from other Greek words that mean destroy, it might be helpful to use “destroy completely” a definition that can be found in Friberg’s Greek Lexicon.

7. *Phthora* (Strong’s #5356, φθορά). *Phthora* means the “total destruction of an entity” (BDAG). 2 Peter 2:12 says that the wicked will be caught and “destroyed.” Galatians 6:8 uses the same Greek word and says that people who sow to the flesh reap “corruption,” while people who sow to the Spirit and reap everlasting life. Since *phthora* means “total destruction,” and in Galatians is contrasted with everlasting life, “total destruction” would be a good translation of *phthora* in both 2 Peter 2:12 (the wicked are totally destroyed) and in Galatians 6:8 (the wicked reap total destruction).

8. *Thanatos* (Strong’s #2288 θάνατος). *Thanatos* means “death; the termination of physical life” (BDAG). Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is “death” in contrast with the gift of God, which is “life.” The choice God gives people is the choice between life and death, not between “everlasting life in pleasure” and “everlasting life in pain.” Each person is given the choice between everlasting life and everlasting death. The end of people’s first life is “death”—no life, no body, no consciousness—until the resurrection. At the resurrection God raises the body from the dead and reanimates it with life. At that point, saved people go on and live forever, but the unsaved are thrown into the lake of fire which is called the “second death” precisely because it is like the first death; people burn to the point they have no life at all; they are annihilated. The second death is mentioned four times in Revelation (2:11; 20:6, 14; and 21:8). Since the Bible cannot contradict itself, it cannot say that the lake of fire is the second death and also say people live forever in torment. One category of those statements would have to be figurative, and we are seeing that the figurative verses are the few that seems to say people will burn forever; they are the figure hyperbole, exaggeration.

4. **Death is really death.**

   In response to our assertion that the Bible teaches that people will “die,” some Bible teachers say that “death” is not really death (the total absence of life), but just
“separation from God.” Although there are times when the word “death” is used in a limited way, such as when describing the “spiritual death” of an unsaved person (Eph. 2:1), the word “death” still means something is dead. For example, when a person is referred to as spiritually “dead,” their spiritual life is not just separated from God, it is “dead.”

The way to see whether the word “death” is used in a limited sense or its standard meaning is to study the whole scope of Scripture on the subject. In this case, the many clear verses that say the wicked will be destroyed lets us know that when God says the unsaved will die a second “death,” He is using “death” in the standard way, meaning there is no life at all. God said in many different ways the wicked would be annihilated, and by saying they are “dead” He is further explaining what eventually happens to the wicked.

Another way we can tell that “death” does not mean “alive but separated from God,” is that the same Hebrew and Greek words that are used for the death of plants and animals are used for the death of humans, and no one would say dead animals are not “dead,” just separated from God. There are no unique words for “dead” that apply only to humans but not to other things that die, but that unique vocabulary would have to exist if humans had a unique kind of “death” that was not experienced by other things that die.

5. “Gehenna” was the name of the garbage dump south of Jerusalem, and no one expected the garbage to burn forever.

Gehenna is a Greek word that is a transliteration from the Hebrew ge Hinnom, which is the name of a valley (the Hebrew word ge means “valley,” and Hinnom was the name of the man who owned the valley). In the Old Testament the valley is known both as the Valley of Hinnom (Ge Hinnom; Neh. 11:30; and some Hebrew texts of Josh. 15:8) and also as the “valley of the sons of Hinnom” (Ge ben Hinnom; Josh. 18:16; 2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 7:31). The Hebrew ge Hinnom came into Greek as the word “Gehenna.”

The Valley of Hinnom came to be used as the garbage dump by the people of Jerusalem. The inhabitants of Jerusalem would carry their garbage, including dead animals, bones and other waste, outside the south gate of the city (still to this day the gate going down to the Valley of Hinnom is called “the dung gate”), down the hill and into the Valley of Hinnom. The waste that was dumped there was then either burned up in the fires that usually burned there, or it rotted away, being eaten by maggots and worms. The people Jesus taught knew Gehenna very well, and a large percentage of them had probably thrown garbage there. They understood Jesus’ teaching that if a person was wicked before God, then at the judgment he would not be let into the kingdom, but like the garbage, would be thrown out and destroyed.

When we put ourselves in the place of Jesus’ audience we can see Jesus’ simple teaching. Things thrown into Gehenna were destroyed. The wicked would be thrown there on the Day of Judgment, so they would be destroyed too. If Jesus were trying to teach that the wicked would burn forever, then he would have had to add that detail to his teaching about Gehenna, but he never did. Why? The answer is simple and biblical: the unsaved do not burn forever, but like the garbage in the Valley of Hinnom, are totally destroyed.
The Greeks transliterated the Hebrew words *Ge Hinnom* into *Gehenna*, but sadly, many English translators did not transliterate *Gehenna* into our English versions, but translated it as “Hell.” But that totally loses the simple truth that Jesus was speaking of a literal valley where garbage was thrown. Then, to make matters worse, many erroneous ideas were attached to what Jesus supposedly said about “hell,” including that he was speaking of a place of eternal torment. He was not. He was speaking of the simple concept that the wicked and unsaved will be totally destroyed, just like the garbage in the Valley of Hinnom was. [For more on Gehenna, see commentary on Matthew 5:22].

6. **The “immortal soul” is not biblical; the Bible never says the soul is immortal.**

Most orthodox theologians acknowledge that a sinner’s body is destroyed after he dies, but they assert that it is the “immortal soul” of a sinner that remains in torment forever. The concept of the “immortal soul” came mainly from Greek philosophy, and entered into Christian teaching mainly through two different pathways. The first way was from Jews who converted to Christianity. After Alexander the Great conquered Israel and Egypt in 332 BC, many of the Jews who lived there came to accept Greek beliefs as true, and when they converted to Christianity they brought those Greek beliefs (myths) with them. The second way the belief in the immortal soul entered Christianity was from the Greeks who converted to Christianity as the Christian Faith began to grow and spread.

It is widely believed that the “immortal soul” is a biblical concept, but it is never mentioned in the Bible. Much has been written showing the soul is not immortal, but it is too much information to expound in this commentary article. (See Graeser, Lynn, Schoenheit, *Is There Death After Life*, pp. 17-28; Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, pp. 65-76; Leroy E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, pp. 529-802; Anthony Buzzard, *Our Fathers Who Aren’t in Heaven*, pp. 208-225.)

The most common use of “soul” in the Bible is its being used to mean a person, an individual, such as when Acts 27:37 says there were 276 “souls” on board the ship (KJV). This is true both in the Old Testament, where “soul” is a translation of the Hebrew word *nephesh* (pronounced nĕ’-fesh) and the New Testament, where it is the translation of the Greek word *psuche* (pronounced soo’-kay). However, due to the common belief that the “soul” lives on after the body dies, it is important that we highlight some verses that show that the soul, as well as the body, is destroyed.

The clearest verse that shows the soul can be destroyed is Matthew 10:28. Jesus was teaching people not to be afraid of people, but to “be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell [Gehenna].” This clear teaching by Jesus should have settled the point that both the body and the soul are “destroyed” in the lake of fire. The soul does not live on forever in torment. Ezekiel 18:20 says that soul that sins will die (KJV). Hebrews 10:39 mentions people who “believe to the saving of the soul” (KJV; the word “soul” is in the Greek text, but not translated as “soul” in many versions). It contrasts those saved souls with the people who draw back from God resulting in destruction (annihilation; Greek = *apôleia*; see #1 above).

Jesus also taught, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matt. 16:25). In this verse, the word “life” is “soul” in the Greek text, and the word “lose” and “loses” is the Greek word *apollumi*, which was covered above and refers to destruction. So although it is not clear in most English translations, when the Greek text is more literally translated the meaning of the verse
becomes clear: “For whoever wants to save his soul will destroy it….” Thus this verse too shows that the “soul” can be destroyed. James 5:20 says the person who “converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death…” (KJV). Although “soul” in this verse seems to mean “person,” it includes the life of the person, the soul, which it says without salvation will die.

The verses above all show that the soul is not immortal, but can be destroyed, and more verses could be added from the Old Testament, such as those that say the “soul” of sinners will be “cut off” (Lev. 7:20; 18:29; Num. 15:30, 31). In concluding this point we need to restate that there is no such thing as the “immortal soul” in the Bible, and many Scriptures, especially the teaching of Jesus, show us the “soul” can be destroyed.

7. “Spirit” is not immortal

One reason that some people say there must be eternal torment for the unsaved is that they claim that people have a spirit, and spirit cannot die. That spirit cannot die is a traditional belief, but it is not a biblical belief. Like the belief in the “immortal soul,” the belief that “spirit” lives forever is not biblical; there is simply no verse to support it. No verse says, “spirit is immortal,” or “spirit lives forever.” On the contrary, we know that “soul” is a kind of “spirit” like “oak” is a kind of tree [see Appendix 6: “Usages of ‘Spirit’”] and soul can be destroyed. So we know that at least some kinds of spirit can be destroyed. Further evidence for that fact is that animals have spirit: “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” (Ecc. 3:21 ESV). This fact is collaborated because the word ruach (“spirit” “breath” or “wind”) is used of animals on several different occasions (cp. Gen. 6:17; 7:15; 7:22; Ps. 104:29; Ecc. 3:19). Although each of these could be rendered “breath,” they could as easily be rendered “spirit,” and the fact that animals have both a ruach (“spirit”) and nephesh (“soul,” see Appendix 7: “Usages of ‘Soul’”) shows that “spirit” and “soul” can indeed be destroyed. Given that fact, in order to be able to say that the “spirit” in man cannot be destroyed we would have to have a verse that expressly states that fact, but there is no such verse. The scope of Scripture plainly testifies that people can be totally annihilated in the Lake of Fire.

8. The Hebrew word Sheol shows us dead people are dead.

More evidence that the soul can be destroyed comes from studying the Hebrew word Sheol. The Old Testament made it clear that when a person died, he went to Sheol. Neither Greek or English has a good equivalent word for Sheol, because it is not a “physical place” where dead people go, like the grave, but rather it is a “state of being;” it is the state of being dead? (cp. Bullinger, A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament; under “hell”). Perhaps a good English equivalent of Sheol would be “grave-dom,” the “reign of the grave.” That Sheol is the state of being dead can be easily confirmed by examining the uses of Sheol in the Old Testament. It is undisputed that when a person dies, his body disintegrates and ceases to exist. But not only does the body cease to exist, the life (sometimes called “soul”) of the person does too. Thus, a person who is dead is dead in every way, not alive in heaven or “Hell.”

There are many verses that show that when the body died, the person, both body and soul, were totally dead. Death and being in Sheol is compared to sleep in many verses (Job 7:21; 14:12-14; Psalm 13:3; 90:5; Dan. 12:2; John 11:11; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:51; 1 Thess. 4:14; 5:10). The comparison is valid because just as there is no consciousness in
sleep, there is none in death. Once a person dies, he does not remember God (Ps. 6:5). In fact, dead people “know nothing” (Ecc. 9:5). They cannot praise God or speak of His goodness (Ps. 30:9; 115:17; Isa. 38:18), they cannot thank God or hope in Him (Isa. 38:18); and they have no knowledge or wisdom (Ecc. 9:10). Obviously, these dead people are not rejoicing in heaven or suffering in “Hell.”

When a person dies he goes to Sheol, which, as we have just seen, is the state of being dead where there is no knowledge, wisdom, memory, praise, or hope. Similarly, when a person dies in the lake of fire and experiences the “second death,” he will again be in Sheol and have total non-existence. In that light, it is important that we notice that Psalm 9:17 (ESV) says, “The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.” Although this verse may have a couple different meanings included in it, and may refer to the first death as well as the second death, the ESV translation is certainly correct that the verse does include the idea of the wicked making a “return” to Sheol. Wicked people die the first time and are in Sheol, then are resurrected to the Judgment. If they are judged unworthy of everlasting life, they are cast into the lake of fire and die again, thus returning to Sheol, the state of death. Thus Psalm 9:17 is another clear verse that teaches the wicked do not suffer forever in the lake of fire. Eventually the wicked return to Sheol and are totally dead.

One of the ways that some Jews came to believe in the “immortal soul” is that when the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek in the version we call the Septuagint (done about 250 BC, a few generations after Alexander conquered Egypt), the Hebrew word sheol was translated as the Greek word hadēs. This created a huge error to occur among the Greek speaking Jews, because in sheol everyone was dead, but in the Greek hadēs, everyone was alive. The Greek language, like English, had no word for “the state of being dead.” Given that fact, the Jews who translated the Septuagint should have transliterated sheol into Greek, like they did for Gehenna. Instead, they translated sheol as hadēs, and by doing that they gave life to the dead. Then, after that time, the Jews who read the Septuagint naturally thought that the dead were alive, a belief that the Pharisees held at the time of Christ, and many of them brought their belief that the dead were alive into Christianity when they converted.

9. The figure of speech hyperbole.

Saying that the Devil and some wicked people will be tormented “for ever and ever” is the figure of speech hyperbole, or exaggeration. Hyperbole was common in the biblical culture, just as it is common in our culture today. Common hyperboles in Western culture are when we are hungry but we say, “I’m starving,” or when we are cold but we say “I’m freezing.” The hyperbole communicates both the intensity of the feeling and the emotion of discomfort that goes with the physical feeling itself. In his book, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, E.W. Bullinger has six pages of examples of hyperboles found in the Bible, and there are many he did not list.

There are other examples of hyperbole that are associated with the Devil, the last days, and the Judgment. For example, by hyperbole the Devil is said to be accusing Christians before God “day and night.” Of course, this is not literal, because there are times when the Devil is on earth and leaves God’s presence (Job 1:12; 2:7; 1 Pet. 5:8). Also, Jesus used hyperbole to good effect when he taught about avoiding Gehenna. He said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away” (Matt. 5:29).
Jesus did not expect anyone to literally obey him, but the hyperbole effectively communicates that, although we should not gouge out our eye, we should not be complacent about the sin in our lives but should take drastic action to cleanse ourselves of sin. The hyperbole in Revelation 20:10, “to the ages of the ages” accomplishes two things. First, it graphically makes the point that the torment will go on for a long time and second, it elicits emotions such as horror, or perhaps satisfaction, that accompany the retribution that has come upon the wicked.

Perhaps another reason for God’s use of hyperbole was the inability of the Greek and Latin languages to express a very large number. The roman numerals used in biblical times had an “I” for ones, an “X” for tens, an “L” for 50, a “C” for 100, a “D” for 500, and an “M” for 1000, but nothing larger than that. Thus numbers in the billions could not be expressed in writing, or for that matter in oral communication. If we postulate that the Devil will burn only one year for every life he has ruined, the number would be in the billions, far too much to express in Roman numerals and put in the Bible. This put the biblical writers in a bind. They had no way to express how long the Devil would actually burn! Thus, the use of hyperbole here is a very fitting way to say that the Devil will be tormented longer than could be easily expressed, but we can see from the scope of Scripture that is was not forever.

10. People will be punished in proportion to their sin.

Scripture says people will receive punishment for what they have done, and that the punishment will be in proportion to the sin they have committed. Romans 2:5 says of stubborn people, “you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath.” Just as godly people by their good works store up treasure for the life to come, wicked people store up wrath for themselves [For more about this, see the commentary on Romans 2:5]. The clear message of Scripture is that unless people get forgiveness for their sins they will receive punishment for the evil they have done (Ps. 62:12; Ecc. 11:9; Jer. 17:10; 32:19; Ezek. 33:20; Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 2:23). Beings such as the Devil and his demons have stored up much wrath for themselves, and will be punished for a very long time before they are destroyed. God metes out two different types of justice: corrective justice and retributive justice. Corrective justice is punishment that is meant to correct a behavior, while retributive justice is retribution, or repayment for something that the person did (see commentary note on 2 Thess. 1:8). Torment and then destruction in the lake of fire is not corrective, but retributive; it is a righteous repayment for harm done. The demons knew this justice was coming, and so said to Jesus, “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?” (Matt. 8:29).

Some theologians have argued against annihilation because they say it would not make sense for God to resurrect someone from the dead only to kill them again. That misses the fact that God’s annihilation in the Lake of Fire is a judgment, a retribution, a fulfillment of a promise, and a lesson, not just a punishment. We can assume many evil people, the Pharisees are a good example, have died in complete confidence that they will be saved, and , as rich and powerful people, often died in the comfort of their own home, well fed and cared for.

Not only do wicked people such as those Pharisees need to be judged and fulfill the promise that “every knee will bow,” but their annihilation is not immediate. The wicked are annihilated after a period of suffering, and that period of suffering fulfills the
Word of God and the justice of God. It seems clear that not every sinner spends equal time suffering, but the more wicked a person is, the more severe the punishment, fulfilling the Scripture that they have stored up wrath for the Day of Wrath (see commentary on Rom. 2:5: “corresponding to your hardness”). It is God’s just retribution that those who have ignored God and caused pain and suffering on earth will suffer in proportion to the evil they have done.

Also, the suffering of the wicked before they are annihilated will show those who have everlasting life that God is truly just. God, through Jesus Christ, offered to pay for the sins of anyone who wished to accept that payment. Those people who rejected God’s offer, and thereby decided by default to pay for their own sins, had to make good their decision, and pay for their sins with suffering and death, just as Scripture said.

**In conclusion**, the verses above are very descriptive of the final end of the wicked, which is total annihilation. No one should use the very few unclear verses that can seem to say that evil people will suffer forever to overturn the dozens of different verses and illustrations that tell us the wicked will be totally destroyed. The overwhelming biblical evidence in both the Old Testament and the New Testament is that wicked people are not tormented forever but are destroyed in the lake of fire, which is the second death.

[For information on the fact that dead people are dead and not alive in any form, see Appendix 4: “The Dead Are Dead”. For more on the punishment of the wicked being in proportion to the wrong they have done, see commentary on Rom. 2:5; for more on Gehenna not being a place of eternal torment see commentary on Matt. 5:22].