

2 Thessalonians 1:9 in the Navajo Bible

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Áko hool'áágóó atídaho'diilyaa doo, Bóhólníihii áádóó bíbee adziil ayóó át'éii bits'áho'dee'nilgo ti'dahojooníih doo[.] (2 Thessalonians 1:9) ¹

They will be **punished** [*tisousin*] with **everlasting destruction** and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power[.] (2 Thessalonians 1:9) ²

Introduction

In this passage what does punishment mean? What does destruction mean? The only way to know is by looking at the words used to convey these ideas. We must start with the text.

Words Used in the Text

Destruction

The Greek word translated "destruction" in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is *olethron*. Thus, "everlasting destruction" is *olethron aiōnion*. Apart from the present passage, this word is used only three times in the New Testament.

hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be **destroyed** and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 5:5)

While people are saying, "Peace and safety," **destruction** will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. (1 Thessalonians 5:3)

People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and **destruction**. (1 Timothy 6:9)

In 1 Corinthians 5:5 destruction is the opposite of salvation. In 1 Thessalonians 5:3 it is the opposite of "peace and safety." In 1 Timothy 6:9 "destruction" is parallel to, and therefore has the same meaning as, "ruin."

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

² English Bible quotations are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

The popular concept is that in hell people suffer forever. All the parts and pieces stay together. The mind still works, so as to tell the person how much they're suffering. Everything continues working. But the person is in indescribable pain. Is this destruction?

In order to understand what destruction means, consider for a moment what it does not mean. *Destruction* is not the same as *construction*. Construction is where you have a collection of parts and pieces and you put them together to make something. So destruction should be the opposite of this. We will surely come to wrong conclusions about what Bible writers mean if we don't take them to mean what they say. In the case of destruction something comes apart. When you take a human apart, can it function anymore? Can it breathe, or think, or feel anything – including pain?

If we take Paul's words at face value and draw from them that the wicked are destroyed, then that's the end. So how can such a punishment be eternal? If it ends, how can it continue forever?

Punishment

The Greek word translated "punished" is from *tisō* ("pay," as in "pay a penalty"). In the New Testament it is used only here. In the Old Testament it is used in Proverbs 24:29; 27:12.

Do not say, "I'll do to him as he has done to me; I'll **pay** that man **back** [*teisomai*] for what he did." (Proverbs 24:29)

The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and **suffer** [*teisousin*] for it. (Proverbs 27:12)

NIV translates with the word "suffer" in Proverbs 27:12, but the meaning of the word is not primarily "suffer" as in feel pain, but "suffer" as in suffer the consequences. Here's the same verse we saw above (Proverbs 27:12), but now in NRSV and TNK.

A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and **suffers the consequences**. (Proverbs 27:12, NRSV)³

The shrewd man saw trouble and took cover; The simple kept going and **paid the penalty** [*teisousin*] (Proverbs 27:12, TNK)⁴

There's a difference between suffering consequences and suffering pain. If a child is told to come, but doesn't come and gets left behind, s/he is suffering the consequences of an unfortunate decision. But if the child cries as a result, chances are it's going to be from loneliness rather than actual pain. Unfortunately, the wording in the Navajo translation (*ti'dahojooníih doo*, "they will suffer") doesn't make this type of neutral meaning available.

³ NRSV = *New Revised Standard Version* (National Council of Churches, 1989).

⁴ TNK = *The Jewish Bible: Torah, Nevi'im, Kethuvim (JPS Tanakh 1985)* (Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

What we're talking about here is suffering the consequences for choices we might have made. I grant that the results of rejecting God will be painful. It is not my purpose to deny this. I merely point out that the word *tisousin* that Paul chose to use in this sentence does not emphasize the fact.

Discussion

The only way to make sense of the seeming contradiction between destruction being the end and "eternal destruction" being forever is to go to the text. If there is a solution to this problem anywhere in Scripture, and if it's a valid solution, it has always been there – in the text. In Romans 6:23 Paul makes a statement that brings clarity to this whole set of questions. There he says,

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Romans 6:23)

Is it true that "the wages of sin is death"? The popular view is that the wages of sin is eternal life in flames, but that's now how Paul says it. He says "eternal life" is the gift of God, and that the opposite of this is "death." Is there a difference between being dead forever and suffering forever? If death is different from life, then yes, these two things are not the same. Thus, we can accept the popular view or we can accept what Paul says. But we can't have it both ways.

Conclusion

In 2 Thessalonians 1:9 Paul says that the punishment bad people receive is destruction and that this destruction lasts forever. The term he uses is "everlasting destruction." What lasts forever is not the painful process by which bad people are destroyed, but the resulting destruction. This destruction is full and final. What lasts forever is the result – not the process that leads to such a result. The punishment is the result. Will the results be eternal? Yes. Will the process that leads to them be painful? Yes.

What do these things say about God? If what I've said is true, is God fair? Yes. The wicked are "shut out from the presence of the Lord" forever. And is God also merciful? Yes. The wicked burn up completely (in Isaiah 10:17 they are consumed like thorns and briars) and then cease to be. All of this fits when we take Paul to mean exactly what he says.