

Will Any Christians End up Gnashing their Teeth?

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I am dealing with the question whether Christians may be refused entrance into God's kingdom. We are told by some teachers that this will happen. When excluded these Christians experience weeping and gnashing of teeth. Most of the texts a friend of mine has heard in support of this notion included "gnashing of teeth", thus the title of this article. In Greek the noun for *gnashing* appears seven times in the New Testament, six in Matthew and the other in Luke. The texts given to my brother included four of the six texts in Matthew (each marked below with an asterisk). I have supplied the other two in Matthew plus the one in Luke, so we can consider all the texts where gnashing of teeth occurs in the New Testament. My brother received two other texts (Matthew 7:23 & 11:12,13) which supposedly assert that believers can miss being in God's kingdom. These texts will be dealt with later. First, let us consider the four instances used to suggest that gnashing of teeth is a possible fate for believers.

***Matthew 13: 47-50, The Parable of the Net**

47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind.
48 When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. 49 So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and *gnashing of teeth*.

***Matthew 22: 1-14, The Parable of the Wedding Banquet**

13 Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and *gnashing of teeth*.'

***Matthew 24**

48-51 But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' 49 and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, 50 the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know 51 and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and *gnashing of teeth*.

***Matthew 25:14-30, The Parable of the Talents**

29 For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 30 And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and *gnashing of teeth*.'

A. My comments on these four texts:

Matthew 13 This parable of the net gives a vivid picture of the Judgment Day (v.49). The separation is of the saved and the lost, expressing the different destinies of sinners (or the evil) separate from the righteous. Later in this essay with a word on justification, I will show that “the righteous” fits believers and “the evil” does not. Applying “the evil” to saved people requires evidence. My friend tells me he has heard no such proof. We cannot just take any Scripture we find which speaks of the awesome judgment on unbelievers and apply it to Christians. In my opinion this is a careless handling of the Bible.

When v.50 refers to the *fiery* furnace, such language refers to hell. In the context of the Parable of the Net, another parable serves as a parallel word about the Judgment Day; this is the Parable of the Weeds. In both parables true believers and false professors are separated. The weeds are burned (v.30) but the wheat is gathered into the Lord’s barn (v.30). Note there are two groups in two places, the fiery furnace (v.42) or the barn. There is no picture of first, some in the kingdom, next, some outside weeping and gnashing their teeth (the imagery of severe pain), and lastly, some cast into the fire. The Bible teaches two destinies not three.

Matthew 22 The man cast out and rejected in v.13 dared to enter the wedding banquet with deliberate disrespect for the rules of that banquet and the expectations of the royal host. This intransigence is an attitude of rebellion, hardly a description of a humble believer. If anyone asserts that the Lord is speaking in this passage of a Christian, real support for such a position should be forthcoming. Assertion is easy; for agreement evidence is necessary.

Matthew 24 The one assigned to the place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth is called a wicked servant (v.48), again not a Biblical description of a believer. This wicked person is then “cut in pieces” which is the imagery of total destruction. God’s Final Judgment is sometimes pictured as destruction, as in Revelation 11:18.

Other Scriptures indicate that fruit bearing proves that one is a disciple (John 15:8). The alternative is not bearing fruit, and that results in being burned up (John 15:6). Land bearing only thorns and thistles is worthless land. It will be burned up (Hebrews 6:8), but with real believers there will always be a degree of fruitfulness, a condition that belongs to their salvation (Hebrews 6:9). This is so because those who have been united to Christ have been set free from the domination of sin (Romans 6:5-7). We are now alive to God (Romans 6:11). Note Romans 6:14,16,17, & 22. The Holy Spirit has been given to every believer and He is active to produce holiness in us. It will not do to call a Christian *wicked*, because if anyone is, that soul is not a believer at all. It is obvious that anyone who suggests that justified sinners may be excluded from the kingdom, has a very low view of sanctification. New believers are all sealed with the Spirit, and He is the guarantee of their inheritance. With the Holy Spirit as our guarantee from God, that inheritance cannot be lost (Ephesians 1:13,14). Instead of being lost, it will be enjoyed.

Matthew 25 and more The worthless servant who is cast into darkness to experience weeping and gnashing of teeth does not refer to a believer who is forever the treasured possession of Christ. In fact not only do we have a secure inheritance, we ARE His inheritance. In Ephesians 1:15-23, Paul’s prayer is that they would know their hope – which is certainly not a matter of being cast into darkness to suffer so much they will grind their teeth. Rather than that, he prays we will know of the inheritance the Lord Jesus has in His people (Ephesians 1:18). This inheritance is called glorious. We are also His bride, and as such we are worked upon until we are perfected (Ephesians 5:25-33). We are His possession, and He is so committed to us that He will not cast out any who have come to Him (John 6:37). Nor will He allow us to be destroyed by

others, because we are kept by the power of God (1 Peter 1:3-5 and John 10:27-30). People who teach that we must work harder to ensure a place in His kingdom should read in the Bible of the Lord's determined commitment to the eternal welfare of His people. Since God did not spare His Son but gave Him up for His people, we must be confident that along with such a sacrifice He will give us all things (Romans 8:32). Bible teachers should be very familiar with what the Bible teaches. But getting back to Matthew 25, the worthless (or unprofitable) servant of v.30 is described as evil or wicked in v.26. That is just another way to say he is an unbelieving person whose life has never been changed by the Lord. He is unsaved. Words that speak of the terrible destiny of unbelievers should never be applied to those the Lord has saved.

B. The other texts which mention *gnashing*

Matthew 8:10-12 speaks of Gentiles coming to the Lord and being fully accepted. At the end time, those who had the heritage of Israel, children of Abraham, called "sons of the kingdom", will be thrown out because of their unbelief. They go into darkness to weep and grind teeth in pain. This is a separation of believers from unbelievers. Christians will not be thrown by the Lord into such suffering, but the important issue for all to face is whether one is a believer or not.

Matthew 13:37-43 Gnashing of teeth comes up twice in Matthew 13. In this part the weeds to be burned up are "sons of the evil one" (v.38). In no way does such language describe believers. On the Judgment Day all the law breakers will be thrown into the fiery furnace (v.42). Fiery furnace is just another way to speak of hell. Hell is the place of gnashing of teeth in all the places which speak of this punishment. Thus the Judgment Day has two destinies not three. Every person in all of human history will be in with the Lord, or out in hell.

Luke 13:23-30 has the one remaining instance of gnashing of teeth in the New Testament. It appears in a paragraph in which the Lord addresses who will be saved and who will not be. Many who seemed to know Him on earth and seemed to be close to Him are shown to be workers of evil (v.27). The strong language continues for all going to the place of teeth grinding. At one time they were privileged and had great advantages. Some who are first (with much opportunity and a good heritage) end up last, while many far from the Lord come to Him from afar. They were the last we would expect to be saved. They had so little contact with Christ in contrast to the people all around the Lord in the time He was here. Many who claimed to know Him (familiarity) were not people He knew as those who had received His Word, the testimony of the Father, the predictions of Scripture, and the ministry of John the Baptist (see John 5:31-47). In the end they were not saved. They did not believe. In this text the door is shut on those who never entered in when they could. Many will seek to enter when it is too late (v.24).

See also **Matthew 7:13-27** which is similar to Luke 13 above. It includes, "I never knew you" (v.23). This "Depart from Me" order is to "workers of lawlessness", not a word about believers who have not worked hard enough! The gate to enter is narrow (v.13). One must come by Christ; all other ways of salvation are false. Those who come to the narrow gate also walk on a narrow path. We face much opportunity to sin. Sinning is easy. Against the world's accepted life of godlessness, true believers obey the Lord, and so they have fruitful lives. In contrast to this, some mimic the words of believers. They even say, "Lord, Lord" but they lack obedience to God (v.21). Some are very involved in religious activity. They are still false, and were never ever known by Christ. In other words, they were never saved. Jesus does not say

of them, "I knew you at one time." Rather He **never** knew them. He is not speaking of Christians who fail to merit the kingdom. No one ever merits any of God's blessings to start with. The evidence of the true believer is that he hears, and with new life from God, he obeys (vv.24-27). Matthew 25:12 ("... I do not know you") should be understood in the same way as Luke 13:27 and Matthew 7:23.

Matthew 11:12, 13 These verses about taking the kingdom by violence are not simple to interpret. Some think the Lord was speaking of violent opposition to His kingdom among men. Others think it refers to those who when they discover the kingdom and its great value seize it (violent in a positive sense) and devote themselves to it. That second sense of great seriousness is also seen in two brief parables in Matthew 13:44-46 and of the zeal of new converts in Matthew 21:31, 32. The passage does not support the idea that only those who struggle greatly and work hard get into the kingdom. We are saved by faith not zeal and by grace not merit. It is the Lord Who sent John the Baptist to stir up a great awakening, and a zealous following was created by the Holy Spirit after the Ascension. In no way can Matthew 11:12,13 be sensibly understood to teach us that only the hard workers get in. That makes our work meritorious, and it reduces terribly the graciousness of the Lord receiving us as His inheritance from His Father, an inheritance purchased by His blood.

C. The Wider Teaching of Scripture on This Question

I have reviewed texts a brother showed me. These were used to teach error. Though I have already brought other relevant texts to interact with the error he and I reject, here are additional Scriptures to consider. They teach important factors that correct a flawed view of the future condition of believers.

It is possible that if all seven texts speaking of gnashing had been given as a group that it would be more clear that gnashing of teeth is another way to speak of going to hell. Matthew 13:37-43 is one example. The word gnashing need not be used at all. The "miserable death" in Matthew 21:41 fits this pattern. "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, *they perceived that he was speaking about them.*" (Matthew 21:45). That shows us how to apply these statements. Matthew identifies the first group that Jesus was talking about, namely the unbelieving religious leaders. It is mishandling the Bible to read of the Lord's enemies and apply words about them to our Lord's children. The Lord often used the language of rejection for hypocrites. He does not speak this way of His own, even when we fail miserably. See how the Lord spoke to Peter in Luke 22:31 & 32.

How should we encourage new Christians? We give thanks to a Father who has qualified all His children to share in the inheritance. (Colossians 1:12) His salvation is not laden down with frightening uncertainty. The truth is that He has delivered from the domain of darkness, and transferred us (already!) to the kingdom of His beloved Son. (Colossians 1:13). We should not worry about entrance into a kingdom of which we are already a part.

The New Testament gives stern warnings about a potential problem among Christians. It is clear in Matthew 7:21-23 that not all who profess the Name of the Lord are saved. Any unsaved person can make a false claim. Only those who speak in the Holy Spirit call Jesus "Lord" sincerely. They cannot disown Him (1 Corinthians 12:3). The Spirit indwells believers and He is a most powerful Lord determined to conform us to Christ (1 Corinthians 6:19 & Romans 8:29). All who have been justified will be glorified (Romans 8:30). This wonderful assurance makes us reject as nonsense any idea that any of the Lord's children will ever be cast into darkness to

gnash their teeth because they did not do more. Paul's words are appropriate: "Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:2,3).

Hebrews is a book that repeatedly addresses the danger of apostasy. Our danger is that we might grow tired of waiting and sag in unbelief, and thus to turn (perhaps under persecution) from the only Lord who saves, the only sacrifice that takes away sin, the only hope that is secure, and the promises which are so certain that God swears to their truth (6:13-20). The only alternatives addressed in Hebrews are: persevering patiently in faith (10:36-39), or falling away by repudiating Christ (6:6). This comes up a number of times in Hebrews, but it is always a matter of two destinies, never three.

2 Peter 1:10,11 Peter urges his readers to pursue a life of virtue, because this leads to certainty (v.10), fruitfulness (v.8), and avoidance of apostasy (v.10). As the divine nature is produced in us (v.4) and pursued by us (v.5), we become more experienced in our knowledge of Christ (vv.2 & 8). A virtuous life has a climax in a welcome into the Lord's eternal kingdom (v.11). The Lord shows in this passage that the way of godliness leads finally to His kingdom. We have entered by faith already, but our pilgrimage and growth find their climax in our entrance into the final form of His kingdom. Then His kingdom is complete, fully established, and without opposition. Evil has been put down. Peter wants us to live now in the character and quality of the kingdom that shall be. We are not to be lazy.

Now does this mean that some will be left out gnashing their teeth while other believers are welcomed into the kingdom? Scripture shows two destinies only, and both are eternal. The power behind all virtue in us is the Lord Himself (v.3). The faith we have, we have obtained from Him (v.1). All our knowledge of God is from His grace (v.3). Everything that pertains to godliness is from His power granted to us. He has called us to His glory and excellence (v.3), and given promises by which we partake of the divine nature. Two great streams meet in 2 Peter 1. All we have and do is from the Lord. It is all secure, so (and here is the second stream) we pursue our calling and all the godliness that is inevitable for us. We have sins in us that frustrate us, but the goal will be attained, and therefore we make every effort to live now as we will eternally.

Every believer will make it. None end up in the weeping and utter darkness of Christ rejecters. We are His and are "in", or not His and will be cast into hell. Because our status is secure, we can work on adding virtue to our lives. (See Philippians 2:12,13.)

Revelation 21,22 likewise presents only two final places: the lake of fire, which is the second death (20:14,15; 21:8) or life with the Lord in the New Jerusalem (21:3). The imagery in Revelation is varied. Another paragraph has the final end expressed as two never changing moral conditions (22:11). And again, as if watching a series of slides, the picture changes again: the redeemed are washed and enter, but the evildoers outside are unclean. It never appears in Revelation that some go to hell, some enter heaven, and some are stuck in between.

Summary

Gnashing of teeth refers to the suffering of the wicked who never belonged to the Lord. It is part of the imagery of hell and eternal punishment. The Biblical view of an inheritance from God is that only Christ deserves it. He has secured His inheritance for Himself (which is real merit),

and shares it with us (Romans 8:17; Galatians 3:29; Ephesians 3:6; Titus 3:7), which is grace. If it is true that our inheritance comes from our works, then our faith is null and the promise is void. For this read Romans 4:13,14 carefully. To teach that our inheritance is a reward for our work is a doctrine which corrupts the gospel. Our inheritance is a gift to us, and our Lord will not disinherit us. We cannot be reconciled to Him the moment we believed and then become His enemies, as if He could not keep us. The Lord's assignment concerning those the Father has given to Him is that He should lose not one! (John 6:39). Our Lord will fulfill the will of His Father. So will any Christians be consigned to darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth? There is not a chance. The Lord knows how to rescue His own (2 Peter 2:9).

A Final Appeal

In **John 17** the Lord Jesus has prayed for His people, including those not born at the time of His prayer (v.20). The Lord Jesus was praying for us! His prayer was good and pleasing to the Father. Anything He would ask of the Father, He will receive (John 11:22; 14:16). Here is some of what He prayed for His own.

He prayed that the Father would keep us. (vv.11 & 15)

He prayed for us to be sanctified. (vv.17 & 19)

He prayed for our unity. (vv.21,22 & 23)

He prayed for us to be with Him where He is. (v.24)

He prayed that we will see His glory. (v.24)

He said He will continue to make the Father known to us. (v.26)

He prayed that the love the Father has for Christ will be in us as well. (v.26)

What a prayer! Not one thing Jesus asked for in His prayer will be denied. What our Lord prayed for us is very much the opposite of a scene of darkness, weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth for His people. Therefore with such assurance from His intercession for us, we need not serve the Lord out of a spirit of fear (2 Timothy 1:7), but out of love and thankfulness. The kingdom of God is a matter of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). It is not dread of what may happen to us if we fail to work hard enough.