

# Precepts

The wicked have laid a snare for me, Yet I have not strayed from Your precepts. Psalm 119:110

November 7, 2021

## Fate of the Wicked 2: Universalism

In our first article in this series we started to consider what the Bible sets forth as the ultimate punishment of the wicked and the unsaved. We examined first the common, traditional view that the wicked and the unsaved will be eternally, consciously tormented in hell and found that this view does not stand up to the test of all Scripture. In this article we will consider the second proposed destiny of the wicked and the unsaved held by many: universalism.

The idea of universalism is considered by those who hold it as the alternative view to traditionalism. It proposes that all wicked men (and perhaps all wicked beings including Satan and his demons, depending on what universalist you talk to) will eventually be restored to God. This view usually includes punishment before restoration for the wicked, and the punishment is often thought to be in the place called hell. Therefore, instead of believing that the lake of fire is preserving fire, these universalists believe that it is remedial fire. Yet to be clear, there is no one, settled view on this among universalists. One universalist might well differ from another regarding what the exact nature of future punishment is and what the exact duration of it might be. Yet of one thing all universalists are certain: every single human being who has ever lived or who ever will live will ultimately be reconciled to God and be saved.

Universalism is viewed as the alternative to traditionalism by those who hold it. Yet at the same time it is closely allied with traditionalism in that both views assume that all men will live forever. Therefore many universalists still believe in the inherent immortality of the soul, which we have already seen is not a Biblical idea. This fact alone calls universalism into question. Have those who hold this view really gone back to the Bible to discover what It teaches in opposition to traditionalism, or have they merely adopted the first alternative view to traditionalism that they came upon or that seemed best to them?

Universalism in its arguments appeals to the goodness of God. The universalists claim that God would not consign people to such a horrible thing as eternal conscious torment. We will admit that for any thinking Christian who has truly considered the God of the Bible this is a strong and compelling argument against traditionalism. Yet just because this argument works against traditionalism does not prove that universalism must be true as the only alternative. For example, this argument does not at all work against conditionalism. But we will consider more about that view later.

Universalism relies on several key passages to promote its views. One of these is Romans 5:12-21, especially verse 18.

**18. Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.**

This verse teaches that all who are dying in Adam will be justified in Christ. Yet to interpret this passage this way is to emphasize one verse over others in the passage. Consider verses 15 and 19.

**15. But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many.**

**19. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.**

These two verses speak of the “many,” not of the “all.” So which is it? Do “many” receive the grace of God or do all? Are “many” made righteous or are all? What does verse 18 mean when it tells us that all men receive the free gift resulting in justification of life? Does this not sound like universalism?

The problem here is when we focus so much on one passage that we do not consider the message of the Bible overall. The fact is that the Bible does speak of something universal, but it is not salvation. The Bible speaks of universal resurrection. Consider John 5:28-29.

**28. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice 29. and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.**

This passage speaks of the truth of universal resurrection. Not just those who are saved will be resurrected, but also those who are lost. Not just those who have done good will be raised, but also those who have done evil. Yet those who have done good come forth to a resurrection resulting in life, whereas those who have done evil come forth to a resurrection resulting only in condemnation. Yet both come forth. So if we will allow for the idea of universal resurrection yet not universal salvation, we can understand this verse as saying that Adam's death is reversed with life universally given to all in resurrection but “after this the judgment,” as Hebrew 9:27 says. All will be justified of their former sins enough to be raised, but after their resurrection they will be judged. This judgment will result in life for some, and punishment and the second death for others.

Colossians 1:20 is another passage used by the universalists to promote their view.

**20. and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.**

This verse speaks of God by Christ reconciling all things to Himself. “All things” is the Greek phrase *ta panta*, which the universalists make to mean the universe, thus concluding that this verse teaches universal reconciliation of all beings, human or superhuman. A.E. Knoch, the universal reconciliationist, thought that *ta panta* means “the universe,” and that this verse indicates that God is going to reconcile every being in the universe, including Satan and his demons, to Himself eventually. That is what the verse would seem to say when we take it at face value and out of its context. Yet the fact is that this verse is found in a context, and like all passages of Scripture the context is key for determining its meaning. We must certainly consider what the passage is talking about and what it is really saying before we take this as being the supreme passage to negate all other passages regarding the final fate of the wicked. We must also consider the phrase *ta panta* and whether or not it truly means everything in existence without exception.

If we would look at verse 16 of Colossians 1, we would find the *ta panta* “all things” again, yet we would learn more about the context of what exactly we are talking about.

**16. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.**

Many would read the first phrase of this verse, “for by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth” and assume that this is telling us that the original creation of the universe was done by Jesus Christ. While this is certainly true, that is not what this verse is saying, as can be seen from the second half of the verse, “whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers.” This limits the scope of the creations that are being talked about.

Otis Q. Sellers in his messages on Colossians 1 used the example of the word “automobiles.” If someone who was not a native English speaker were to examine this word to find out what it means, he would find that it is made up of two elements. The first is “auto,” which means “self.” For example, in the word “automatic” this refers to some machine or process that runs itself. “Autonomous” refers to one who makes the rules and laws to govern himself. Then we have the element “mobile.” This means something that is capable of motion. For example, a mobile home is a home capable of being moved. So the word automobile means by its elements a “self-mover.”

Yet our non-native English speaker, though he had hit upon the meaning of this word from its elements, would still be missing part of the meaning of this word. For of course there are many things that are self-movers. An airplane is a self-mover. A motorboat is a self-mover. Even a riding lawn mower is a self-mover. So this student of English would need to find this word used in a typical sentence. Suppose he came on this sentence: “Before the advent of the electric car, all automobiles were powered by the internal combustion engine, whether they were Ford or Chevy or Dodge or Toyota or VW or any other brand.” When our non-English speaking investigator came upon this phrase, he would find that the meaning of “automobile” in this sentence is made clear to him. He now knows that, in this sentence at least, airplanes, motorboats, and riding lawn mowers are not in mind, but rather motorcars are what is meant by “automobiles.” That is made clear to him because the automobiles in question are defined as being Ford, Chevy, Dodge, Toyota, VW, and the like. Once he reads these names, if he knows what they mean, he can no longer believe that all self-moving machinery is in mind, for the context has told him otherwise.

The same thing is true in Colossians 1:16. Upon reading the first part of the verse, we might imagine that all things in the universe are being referred to, particularly since we know that Jesus Christ is indeed the Creator of all that is. Yet once we read the second half of the verse, we can no longer honestly think that. The things created that are in mind are defined as being thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. Once we read this, we can no longer imagine that the entire universe is in the picture here. Instead, we can clearly see that the “all things” in mind are all authorities, not all creatures.

When God made all things He also made certain beings that he set into positions of authority. All these positions were originally made by Him, and they were all originally made to rule over their own sphere of authority for Him. They were to partner with Him in the rulership of all He had made. Yet the time came when various ones of these authorities rebelled against the God Who created them, due to Adam rebelling on earth and Satan rebelling in heaven. Now, therefore, there are many of these rulerships that are currently out of conformity and no longer serving the God they were created to serve. So verse 20 tells us that God has a plan, and someday He is going to reconcile all these authorities to Himself. This may not be by saving the one holding that authority. It might be by removing the one holding that authority from his position (or even from his life) and putting another one in that position of authority who is in conformity to the God he is meant to serve. Yet all authorities will someday be reconciled to conform to Christ Who made them.

This explanation of this verse fits with the true meaning of the Greek phrase *ta panta*. This phrase, which literally translates into “the all,” does not mean all things without exception. If we examine Colossians 3:8, we can see that this is true.

**8. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.**

In this case, our translators were forced to translate *ta panta* by something other than “all things.” Instead, they made it to be “all these.” For if Paul is telling us to put off all things without exception, how would we do that? Would we have to put off our clothes, since they are a part of all things? Would we have to put off our lives and commit suicide because our lives are part of all things? No, here clearly the “all things” mentioned are the things in context, the things listed, “anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.” Thus translators, even those who make *ta panta* mean “all things” in other contexts, are forced to make it be “all these” here. Yet I would contend that this is what *ta panta* means in all its occurrences.

Ultimately I believe that *ta panta* is an idiom meaning “all this” or “all these,” depending on if the context demands a singular or a plural meaning. In case you are not familiar with what an idiom is, it is a phrase that does not follow the normal rules of grammar and whose meaning is not derived from the meaning of the individual words used in the phrase. For example, if one said that “the navy took ship in Florida,” that would be an idiom. If one discovers what “took” means and what “ship” means, he will still not have figured out what the phrase “took ship” means. It means that the navy (or at least many members of the navy) embarked on a ship or ships in Florida. Notice too that normal rules of grammar do not apply to this idiom. One might ask assuming the navy got on more than one ship if it should not be “the navy took ships in Florida.” The answer is no. “Took ship” is an idiom. “Took ships” is not. If one said “took ships,” all he could mean is that the navy captured multiple enemy vessels in Florida. He could not mean that the navy embarked on many ships in Florida, for “took ships” is not an idiom. Only in the singular “took ship” is an idiom.

So *ta panta*, that exact Greek phrase, is an idiom, and only that phrase is an idiom. If one puts the word “all” in any other form, *pas*, *pan*, etc., then that is not the idiom, and all it can mean is “all” literally. Yet the exact phrase *ta panta* is an idiom meaning “all this” or “all these.” That is the way it is used in Colossians 3:8, and that is the way it is also used in Colossians 1:16 and Colossians 1:20.

Again, there are currently many authorities that God created in the beginning that are nevertheless currently wicked because the individuals holding those authorities are wicked and are in rebellion against God. Ephesians 6:12 assures us of this, “**12. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.**” We can be sure from these words that many of the current rulers among the heavenly rulers are wicked. These hosts were created by God and therefore are “spiritual,” yet they have fallen away from God and are wicked. Yet Colossians 1:20 tells us that all these authorities will someday be made congruous with Christ. It does not tell us how: by reforming those holding the authorities or by removing those holding the authorities and replacing them with others. Yet it is telling us that all authorities will someday be reconciled or made congruous with Christ. It is not telling us that every being in the universe will someday be saved.

Another verse in the Bible that the universalists use to promote their idea of the universal salvation of all, even the wicked, is I Timothy 2:4. **who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.** The reasoning based on this verse runs like this: God wills all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. God always gets what He

wants. Therefore, since God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, that means that all men will someday be saved so that God will get what He wills.

While this reasoning sounds good, it does not stand up to careful scrutiny. The word for “will” here, *thelo*, indicates a desire, not a settled determination. The word for a settled determination is the Greek *boulomai*. If we follow the word *thelo* out, we would find that God does not always get what He desires.

For example, consider I Thessalonians 4:3. **For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality.** This verse, speaking to the believers in Thessalonica, tells them that God wills that they be set apart and abstain from fornication or sexual immorality of all kinds. Indeed, I think few would argue against the truth that this is God’s will for all believers. He wills that we abstain from sexual immorality. Yet in this regard, does God always get what He wants? No, I think we would have to admit that He does not. Not all believers in Jesus Christ abstain from sexual immorality. Certainly that is true in a society like ours. Some of my readers might themselves have committed sexual immorality, perhaps even after becoming a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. If that is the case, you are a living testimony to the fact that God does not always get what He wants, for He has not gotten what He wants in your life.

Moreover I believe that “all men” is not talking about individuals. “All men” is referring to all mankind, and is telling us that God desires mankind to be saved. For example, during the Civil War in the United States the north went to war with the south in order to preserve the union of the states. The fact is that the north won, which meant that right or wrong the union was preserved. Yet many soldiers from both the north and the south died in that war. They did not experience the preservation of the union. They died while it was still in question. The union might have been saved, but that did not mean that those individual soldiers were saved. The same is true of mankind. All mankind will be saved and will come to the knowledge of the truth. This will take place in God’s coming kingdom, which the earth will see and experience someday. Yet when mankind is saved not every individual will be saved. We cannot deny that God does want every individual to be saved, but many of them will continue to refuse Him regardless. That means that God will not get what He wants regarding every individual, though regarding mankind as a whole He will. Mankind will be saved and will come to the knowledge of the truth. May the day that happens come soon!

The weakness of universalism is that it ignores the many statements in the Bible that tell us about the end of the wicked. Far from saying that the wicked will eventually be redeemed and live forever like all the saved, the Bible teaches that it is possible to perish. Psalm 37:20 makes this clear.

**20. But the wicked shall perish;  
And the enemies of the LORD,  
Like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish.  
Into smoke they shall vanish away.**

This verse tells us that, far from being saved, the wicked shall perish. Their disappearance is described like the splendor of a meadow that in time of drought or when the fall comes disappears and is gone. Finally, they are said to consume into smoke. When anything burns up and consumes into smoke that is the end of its physical existence. Human beings are no exception to this. When one does that one has ceased to exist. That is the reality of what it means to perish. The Bible never teaches that we are immortal and undying. Instead, from its teaching it is clear that it is possible to cease to exist. Ezekiel 28:19 in speaking of Satan the “king of Tyre” makes this clear enough.

**19. All who knew you among the peoples are astonished at you; You have become a horror, And shall be no more forever.**

If the end of Satan, the worst of all wicked, is nevertheless to cease to be, then certainly the same final fate will be brought upon his minions as well. That is not to say that Satan will not be punished prior to his destruction, for he certainly will. Yet his final fate shall be to exist no more forever. And this is true of wicked men as well. There are some whose end is destruction, not salvation. Philippians 3:19 makes this clear.

**19. whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.**

This verse tells us of some whose end is destruction. If this is their end, then their end cannot also be that they will be saved and live forever. The word “end” here indicates their termination. What it has to say is very clear. We cannot pretend in the light of it that none will ever end up destroyed. This verse makes it clear that that is not the case. Some will come to an end in destruction. That means that not all will be saved. Universalism is clearly wrong.

In Mark 14:21, the Lord Jesus speaks of Judas and says, **“21. The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had never been born.”** The Lord Jesus claims it would have been better for Judas if he had never been born. Yet if Judas is ultimately saved, if he ultimately receives eternal life and a place in God’s kingdom, then it was clearly better for him to have been born, no matter how much suffering and hardship he might face as punishment before he reaches that end. If Judas will finally be saved, then it was infinitely better for him to have been born. This shows us clearly that Judas cannot be saved. But this takes us further than this, for if even one person is not ultimately saved, universalism cannot be the truth. Since we know that, for one, Judas will not be saved, then we can conclude that it is simply not true that all will be saved. Universalism is in error.

In conclusion, universalism does have to commend it the fact that it denies the grim picture that is painted by traditionalists of God as an unending tormenter of His enemies. Yet universalism still is lacking in true Biblical support. Universalism must base its ideas on a few debatable passages that when examined more closely are talking about something else. Universal resurrection is confounded with universal salvation, which it is not. Universal reconciliation of all positions of authority to God is confounded with the reconciliation of all individuals holding those authorities to God, or even with individuals not holding authorities being reconciled to God. The arguments of universalists based on these passages demonstrate the confusion in the universalists’ minds regarding the meaning of the passages in question. Moreover while drawing wrong conclusions from these passages, universalists ignore the preponderance of Biblical evidence which does not point to salvation for the wicked at all. Instead the testimony of God’s Word paints a grim picture of the end in destruction of the wicked. The universalism view fails to stand up to the test of Scripture.

Nathan C. Johnson

## Letters to Precepts

(On “Fate of the Wicked Part 1: Eternal, Conscious Torment”)

Letter: Thank you for sending the introduction to the study on “Eternal, Conscious Torment.”

*Nathan: You are welcome.*

Letter: With regard to Ecclesiastes 9:4

**Precepts: A lowly, poor person who is alive is better off than a powerful, rich person who is dead. Oh, how traditionalists hate this passage! No wonder they attempt to discredit the testimony of Ecclesiastes.**

Letter: Once one has bought into a narrative, it is a hard thing for the person to become dislodged from it. It is familiar, and it insulates the man from needing to do any study or consideration of evidence. If any work is done, it is just in the form of reading what people who agree with the same narrative think. In contrast, Scripture demands that we believe what It says. This is a hard thing for man to take. Some still have a need to feel they believe what It says, so they prefer to reimagine what it says, either by attempting to discredit the portions they do not agree with as being additions of men, or insisting that the parts they disagree with actually say something else. In their foolishness they feel that God is ok with this. In the judgment, what protest of theirs can possibly stand?

*Nathan: Even those who should know better want to discredit the testimony of Ecclesiastes because they do not like its plain teaching on death. One of the most cherished beliefs of man is that dying he will not die, but will be found immortal like God. Yet this always was and remains a lie. Death is the reality that hangs over us all, and denying it is denying the truth of God. Not just Ecclesiastes, but Christ, Paul, David, Hezekiah, and many others have confirmed*

*the same truths that Ecclesiastes teaches. Those are explained away either by ignoring them or by redefining words and terms. But I suppose Solomon speaks so plainly that they cannot figure out a way to do this, so instead they proceed by writing off his book altogether. Yet such will not avail them when the time comes. Like it or not, when they go into death they will be dead, and in the resurrection it is the Word of God that they discredited and explained away that will judge them.*

Letter: With regard to I Timothy 6:16 and I Corinthians 15:54

**Precepts: He alone qualifies as immortal. The rest of us can only put on immortality as He grants it to us in the future at the resurrection**

Letter: Thank you for showing without question that only He is immortal and it is He Who has the right to grant this immortality to those who are in Him. May there be many who are affected by this study in the weeks and months ahead.

*Nathan: You are welcome. It is sad that so many ascribe to fallen man this trait that by rights belongs to God alone. Only Christ is immortal, and only He can grant immortality on those whom He chooses. Yet the empty philosophy of life after death still dominates the minds and hearts of the many. As you say, may many turn from these traditional errors to at last embrace God's truth regarding death and resurrection.*

Nathan C. Johnson

*Next issue: Presenting more comments I have received on my website, [precepts.wordpress.com](http://precepts.wordpress.com). Comments and thanks for articles on Matthew 28 and Time Reckoning Methods: Anno Dei and Anno Mundi Reckoning. A reader desires further information on "Contradictions in Scripture: Peter's Denials." Another reader disagrees with the Godhood of Christ in "Will Christ Step Down?" Another reader "challenges" me to a debate...with someone else(!)...on "Christ's Big Mistake Part 2: Some Standing Here Shall Not Taste of Death." Then, positive comments on "Balaam's Wicked Advice" and "The Return of David: The Half-Hearted Mephibosheth," as well as a question on the latter.*