

Their Worm Does Not Die: Annihilation and [Mark 9:48](#)

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In my recent response to Matt Chandler's otherwise praiseworthy *The Explicit Gospel*, I criticized what I believe to be several mistakes Chandler makes concerning final punishment. One of them, I argued, was that in citing Jesus' words in [Mark 9:48](#) Chandler fails to point out that the passage Jesus quotes "*explicitly* says that it is corpses whose 'worm will not die'."¹ I made the claim that "The idiom communicates the shame of having one's corpse unburied, and arguably the irresistible and complete consumption of those corpses by maggots."

Many traditionalists, however, who *do* point out that the hosts of Isaiah's undying worms were corpses, nevertheless insist that the imagery supports the traditional view of hell. Whether they believe maggots will *literally* feed upon the bodies of the wicked for eternity—albeit living, immortal bodies—or whether they believe the idiom *symbolically* points toward an eternity of conscious torment, either way it is argued that the text of Isaiah, quoted by Jesus, *depicts* ever-consuming worms which never die. The fire that isn't quenched will be the subject of a future post here at Rethinking Hell; in the meantime, let us take a look at the gruesome idiom that is its parallel.

Misquoting Jesus

It's worth noting first that when traditionalists quote this favorite of their proof-texts, they often *misquote* it. Neither [Isaiah 66:24](#) nor [Mark 9:48](#) say that the worm will "never" die. Very dynamic, thought-for-thought translations like the Common English Bible and the New Living Translation will sometimes say the worm will never die, but this is an act of interpretation, not translation. Most translations, particularly more literal ones, render the text "will not," "shall not" or "does not" die. That's all that the author says as part of the idiom.

This doesn't stop Robert Morey from writing that "Christ used the phrases 'unquenchable fire' and 'never-dying worms'."² Thankfully Morey acknowledges that this is his "paraphrase."³ Other authors do not: Robert Reymond tells us that "here the impenitent's 'maggot' is said never to die";⁴ Christopher Morgan says the "agents of suffering (the worm and the fire) are never extinguished";⁵ John Blanchard says these passages refer to "a worm constantly gnawing at those who are condemned to spend eternity there."⁶

The Hebrew language afforded Isaiah the ability to communicate "never," had he intended to do so. In [Judges 2:1](#) the angel of the Lord says, "I will never break My covenant with you." Nathan prophecies against David in [2 Samuel 12:10](#), quoting God as saying, "The sword shall never depart from your house." In [Psalm 15:5](#) David sings, "He who does these things will never be shaken." In each case, the word "not" from [Isaiah 66:24](#), לֹא (*lo'*), is used in conjunction with the

Hebrew word עֹלָם (*owlam*), meaning "everlasting." In other words, "will not ever." [Isaiah 66:24](#) does not contain *owlam*.

Likewise, had they wished to do so, Greek enabled the translators of the Septuagint (and the Lord Himself who quoted it) to translate [Isaiah 66:24](#) as saying the worm will "never" die. In [Matthew 7:23](#) Jesus says, "I never knew you." Paul says in [1 Corinthians 13:8](#) that "love never fails." [Hebrews 10:1](#) says the Law "can never ... make perfect those who draw near." Each occurrence of "never" in those verses translates the Greek word οὐδέποτε (*oudepote*), a compound word meaning "not at any time." This is lacking in both the LXX rendition of [Isaiah 66:24](#), and in Jesus' citation thereof in [Mark 9:48](#); they simply use the word οὐ (*ou*) meaning "not." Isaiah, quoted by Jesus, simply says the worm will *not* die.

Will Not Die

If we were to consistently take "will not die" to mean "will *never* die," we would make a mess of Scripture. Joseph tells his brothers in [Genesis 42:20](#), "Bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die." The Lord directs Moses in [Exodus 30:20](#), "When they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water, so that they will not die." Zedekiah says to Jeremiah in [Jeremiah 38:24](#), "Let no man know about these words and you will not die." Obviously Joseph's brothers did not think he was promising them immortality; Moses was not assured that by washing with water when entering the tent the priests would never die; Jeremiah did not take Zedekiah to mean he would live forever by remaining silent.

But we should probably give the traditionalist authors I quoted earlier the benefit of the doubt; perhaps their use of words like "never" and "eternity" is not misquotation, or a mere assumption that "will not die" means "will never die." Perhaps, instead, they think this is the conclusion that is best drawn from the idiomatic worm's assumed contrast with a worm which normally *would* die. Edward Donnelly says "When the maggots had stripped the corpses to the bone, they died themselves. Here, however...the worms are never satisfied."⁷ Alan Gomes explains that "worms are able to live as long as there is food for them to consume. Once their food supply has been consumed, the worms eventually die. But the torments of hell are likened to undying, not dying worms."⁸ Robert Peterson suggests that, "Normally, maggots feed on their prey until it is consumed, then they die. The 'worms' of hell, however, will never complete their work."⁹ But this raises the question: Is the contrast, between a worm which won't die and one which will, intended to point toward one which will *never* die?

Certainly not, for a similar contrast is intended in the other passages in which "will not die" occurs, a contrast between one's death if instructions are not followed, and one's life if they are. And yet the promise is not of everlasting life, nor the instructions to be eternally followed. Joseph's promise was that his brothers would not die by *his hand* as suspected spies, if they followed his instructions *at that time*. God's promise to Moses was that a priest would not die *while performing his service*, if he washed his hands as part of that service *during the course of his natural life*. Jeremiah was not put to death by the officials of the king of Babylon *before* Jerusalem was captured, because he did not reveal the nature of his conversation with Zedekiah *until its capture*. (He continued to live, but this had nothing to do with Zedekiah's advice.)

When the statement is recorded in Scripture, that someone or something "will not die," a specific context is in view; no life is promised beyond that context. And in [Isaiah 66:24](#), that context is the consumption of a corpse. Their worm, it is promised, will not die *in that context*, will not be prevented by death from consuming its host. This is an assurance that the abhorrent process of decay will continue unabated until the corpse is completely consumed; the worm is promised no life beyond that.

Shame and Stouthearted Scavengers

Consider the curse the Lord promised to the people of Israel in [Deuteronomy 28:26](#), that if they would disobey Him, "your carcasses will be food to all birds of the sky and to the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away." Or take [Jeremiah 7:33](#)'s very similar promise concerning Gehenna, that "the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky and for the beasts of the earth; and no one will frighten them away." What is the message here? Is the Lord promising that these scavenging beasts and birds will eternally feed upon the corpses of the wicked?

No. In [2 Samuel 21:10](#), after the Gibeonites put Rizpah's sons to death, Rizpah kept vigilant watch over their corpses. "She allowed neither the birds of the sky to rest on them by day nor the beasts of the field by night." Rizpah was able to frighten away the scavengers which would have otherwise fed upon her sons' bodies, and as a result they were not fully consumed "from the beginning of harvest until it rained on them from the sky,"¹⁰ a period of time lasting perhaps several months. But the beasts and birds of [Deuteronomy 28:26](#) and [Jeremiah 7:33](#), it is promised, will *not* be frightened away. Those stouthearted scavengers will *not* be prevented from consuming the corpses of the slain wicked.

And there's another element to the imagery. These courageous consumers communicate that the shame of the wicked will not be resisted. Peterson gets it somewhat right, explaining,¹¹

In Old Testament times victorious armies sometimes left their foes' bodies unburied as a sign of contempt. For corpses to be publicly exposed was a great disgrace. This accounts for the courageous efforts of the cities of Jabesh Gilead to recover the dead bodies of Saul and his sons from the Philistines ([1 Sam 31:11-13](#)). And it also explains Rizpah's remarkable protection of her sons' dead bodies from the birds and wild animals ([2 Sam 21:10](#)).

Peterson grasps, apparently, the shame of one's exposed corpse being consumed by beasts and birds. [Deuteronomy 28:26](#) and [Jeremiah 7:33](#), then, promise that the shame of the wicked will be irresistible. But in his attempt to rescue the traditional view of final punishment from the *real* implications of [Isaiah 66:24](#), Peterson contradicts himself when it comes to the impact of scavengers on the shame of their hosts, for he suggests that if the *worm* were allowed to consume its host, its shame would come to an end.

You see, on one hand, Peterson recognizes that it was on account of shame that Rizpah drove scavengers away from her sons' corpses. But he goes on to say, "But in the prophet's picture [in [Isaiah 66:24](#)], 'their worm will not die...' The shame of the wicked will have no end."¹² Think

about this carefully. If a body that is never fully consumed communicates endless shame, this implies that shame ends with complete consumption, but if that's the case, Rizpah's act served only to *prolong* her son's shame. Why would she delay the end to their shame for what may have been several months as maggots did slowly what the beasts and birds she drove away could have otherwise done much more quickly? It simply makes no sense.

Rizpah's vigilance in protecting her sons' bodies from consumption by scavengers was her attempt to *resist* their shame, not prolong it. But [Deuteronomy 28:26](#) and [Jeremiah 7:33](#) say that "no one will frighten them away," communicating that the shame of those wicked will be irresistible. Scavenging beasts and birds will not be prevented from fully consuming the corpses of the wicked. This doesn't bring an end to their shame; it makes it permanent.

Irresistible Consumption

That's what is promised by [Isaiah 66:24](#), and why the wicked "will be loathsome to all mankind."¹³ Not because immortal scavengers will forever gnaw upon *living* bodies, but because maggots will not be prevented by death from fully consuming *dead* ones. Not because their shame is prolonged by being *perpetually* consumed, but because their shame is made permanent and everlasting by being *fully* consumed. And this is the background to Jesus' words in [Mark 9:48](#), with which His hearers would have been familiar. To whatever degree we are to take it symbolically, the imagery depicts exactly the opposite of what is claimed by adherents to the traditional view of final punishment, who say the worm's food never runs out. The undying worm of [Isaiah 66:24](#) and [Mark 9:48](#) serves as no challenge to the conditionalist view of final punishment as the permanent execution of the wicked.