

# Understanding Eternal Judgment



There is widespread rejection today of the Bible's teaching on eternal judgment.

There is rejection of the doctrine that only the born again believer in Jesus Christ has eternal life. There is the idea that there might be other paths to salvation, that an unbeliever might be saved because of his sincere response to "natural light," etc. For example, Don Richardson, author of *Peace Child*, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, and *Heaven Wins*, says that natural light is "salvific," meaning that it is able to bring salvation apart from the knowledge of the gospel.

There is also widespread rejection of the doctrine that the unbeliever will suffer eternal punishment in the lake of fire.

At the heart of this confusion is the rejection of what the Bible says about God's character and the nature of the atonement that was made for sin.

If one believes that God is a holy God who judges every infraction of His law and that apart from a proper judicial payment (atonement) made to satisfy (propitiate) the penalty demanded by His law, it is not difficult to understand and accept eternal judgment, and this is exactly what the Bible teaches.

It is summarized in the following passage:

"Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth *to be* a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, *I say*, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Romans 3:24-26).

This passage teaches the following foundational truths:

First, Christ's bloody death on the cross was a *propitiation*. This is a judicial or forensic concept that refers to the satisfaction of a judicial debt. Thus, this definition of Christ's atonement is called *forensic atonement*. The sinner has broken God's law, and the wages of that high crime is death. That was God's law from the beginning of man's history. He gave Adam one law and proclaimed the death penalty for breaking it. The death is not only physical death but also eternal death in the lake of fire, which is the second death (Rev. 20:15).

Second, Christ's propitiation by His bloody death has purchased *redemption* for those who believe. Redemption refers to being purchased from the slave market of sin. Because the Son of God has paid the price demanded by God's holy law, the sinner who receives Christ as Saviour can be forgiven of his sin and granted eternal life. He is redeemed.

Third, by Christ's propitiation, God can be just and His holy law can stand, while also being the justifier of those who believe in Jesus as Saviour. In other words, God's law remains in full force, because it has been satisfied. We see this principle in human societies. If a nation's laws are not enforced, if punishment for infractions can be escaped by paying bribes, having contacts in high places, enduring a mere "slap on the wrist," etc., the rule of law is destroyed. Only when the law is satisfied by the payment of the due penalty can the rule of law stand and have its godly effect. Likewise, if God lightly "forgave" criminals who have broken His law without exacting the due penalty, His rule of law would fail and His universe would be thrown into moral turmoil. The omniscient God solved this "dilemma" by coming to earth, becoming incarnate as the God-Man, and paying the price that His own law demands from sinners. Now He can forgive sinners who come to Him on the basis of His redemption, and His law is still in full eternal force.

Fourth, the atonement made by Christ has universal application. It is offered to all "which believe in Jesus." God cannot be blamed when men ignore or reject His salvation. He has done everything possible. He provided salvation at great cost. The evidence for God is written in creation and in man's own conscience, the Bible in whole or in part has been translated into most languages, and the gospel of Christ has been preached throughout the world.

If men have no interest in the gospel and rush on to judgment, that is not God's fault. The God who will condemn an unsaved sinner to eternal judgment is the very God who has purchased that sinner's salvation and mercifully called that sinner to repentance and faith.