

The Cross and Judgment

By

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The focal point of all history is Christ, and the focal point of Christ's work is His death on the cross.

What few seem to recognize is that the death of Christ on the cross is also the focal point of eschatology, that God's ultimate purpose for man is portrayed and accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ. Popular concepts of the judgment and end-time things ignore the basis of the judgment as given in the first three chapters of Genesis and the demonstration as given in Christ's death.

Created in the image of God, man was given life on the condition that he continue in fellowship with the Creator by obedience to Him. For breaking this fellowship the sentence was death: "The day thou eat thereof thou shall surely die." After he had disobeyed God and began to suffer the penalty of mortality (death having begun its process immediately) he was to hear the amazing promise, spoken to the serpent: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: he shall bruise thy head, and thou shall bruise his heel." (Gen. 3:15).

The promise of the Messiah was predicted upon this dilemma that man faced in the garden: Life in the image of God, or death because of sin, and it reaches forward to that final day of judgment when every person will find his place in one of these categories—life or death. The ultimate destiny of the righteous is dependent upon that act of Christ in His atoning sacrifice and the ultimate destiny of the unsaved also is determined by what Christ did on the cross. Christ's death on the cross is prophetic.

Old Testament prophets generally made no sharp distinctions as to Christ's first and second comings, so closely related are the two events. The first coming deals with the redemption from sin and death in the act of Jesus' death. The second coming is the result of what happened at the first: those redeemed are spared the judgmental death so that they may live, and those that reject redemption are themselves sentenced to die again. Christ's first coming was a judgment in itself (John 12:31–32), and continues to stand as judgment for all, based on whether or not His death is applied by faith.

The Old Testament sacrifices focused upon one thing: "The soul that sins, it shall die." Every sacrifice was a "type" or "shadow" of the ultimate sacrifice of the "Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world." The animals were slain, not tortured. The blood which was used in the sacrificial rite was significant of the death of the animal: "The life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your lives; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life" (Lev. 17:11). The essential element in the sacrifice was the death of the animal, the application of the blood being the evidence that a death had taken place.

The sacrificial animal was to die because that was the penalty upon the sinner. Not only was the animal to die, but to be "roasted with fire" and "that which remained to

be burnt with fire” (Ex. 12:8–10; Lev. 19:6), thus portraying the ultimate death by fire at judgment. The value of the atonement was in the actual death of the sacrificial animal.

When Jesus appeared as the “Lamb of God” to be our final and all-embracing sacrifice, it was His death that fulfilled the Old Testament types and made atonement for our sins. When he entered the stream of humanity it was for the specific purpose of being able to “taste of death” in man’s place (Heb. 2:9). Therefore, it is explained that since the “children are sharers in flesh and blood, He also in like manner partook of the same, that through death he might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:14–15).

At issue was not a great amount of suffering and torture, but death. Jesus became a flesh and blood man in order that He might undergo human death, the death that is awaiting man in judgment for his sin. While we are given to singing of Christ’s suffering and to describing in great detail the events of the crucifixion, it is only the death itself that had any atoning force in meeting the penalty for sin.

Notice how Isaiah describes the work of Jesus in dying: “He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due” (Vs. 8). “It pleased the Lord to bruise him...when thou shall make his life (soul, his entire being) an offering for sin...” (Vs. 10). “He shall see the travail of his life and be satisfied” (Vs. 11). “Because he poured out his life unto death” (Vs. 12). It was in the death of Jesus, and not in His shame, grief and agony that preceded it, that the wages of sin was met. Certainly there is a direct connection between the penalty the sinner is destined to receive at judgment and that which Jesus received as the One who stood in Judgment in the sinner’s place.

The principle New Testament Scriptures on the death of Christ focus on this solitary doctrine, the He met sin’s penalty by death. “Christ died for the ungodly...we were reconciled to God through His death” (Rom. 5:6–11). “One died for all, therefore all died...Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf” (II Cor. 5:14–21). “And through him to reconcile all things unto himself having made peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). “Once at the end of the ages had he been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26, 10:14). “Who his own self bear our sin in his body upon the tree” (I Peter 2:24). All speak the same thing; that when Jesus assumed our sin to meet sin’s penalty, the judgment was not satisfied by the torturous suffering He first endured, but by His death. If Jesus met the penalty for sin by taking that sin upon Himself and then suffering death for it, it must follow that the penalty for sin for the unredeemed is death and not perpetual suffering and torture in some form of life to continue endlessly. If the penalty for sin is life in some miserable context in eternity then no atonement has been made of this nature and therefore there would be no hope for the sinner. But, thank God, the penalty is such that Jesus has already met it for every faithful believer.

The question is often raised about the term “eternal punishment.” In Matthew 25:26 Jesus speaks of eternal punishment for the unredeemed and eternal life for the redeemed. The argument claims that the punishment must continue for the one as long as life continues for the other. This fails to take into account two things. First, in eternity time ceases, for after judgment “time shall be no more.” God is eternal, meaning that He is changeless, fixed, without beginning or end—He is immortal. Ad day with Him is as a

thousand, meaning that all time is **at once** with God. So it is not a question of how long the punishment goes on or how long the redeemed live. The lives of the redeemed will be fixed—incorruptible, immortal, timeless—as Christ is. The lost will be punished by death, and that too will be fixed and unchanged.

Secondly, the scriptures speak of eternal punishment not eternal punishing. The punishment is death. That is what Jesus suffered when he met the punishment. We must not divorce the final punishment for sin from that which Jesus did to atone for it!

This is to apply the same rules that are normally applied to other nouns of action which are modified by the Latin term “eternal.” “Eternal judgment” (Heb 6:2) is never understood to mean that the judging continues to go on forever, but that the results of that judgment are final. “Eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12) is never thought to mean that the work of redeeming must continue forever, but that after redemption is accomplished the result of it is eternal. It is the result of the action that is eternal and not the act itself. “Eternal salvation” (Heb. 5:9) does not mean that Jesus must continue dying to save us. The salvation, once effected, results in a person being saved eternally. The result remains even after the act has ended. So it is with the expression “eternal punishment.” The act of punishing will take place in the day of judgment. While no one knows how long it may take for the death sentence to be carried out, the scripture is clear that the punishment itself is death, and once that act of punishing has taken place, the result will be eternal.

While Christ suffered long and intensely, there came a time when the ordeal was over and He had “poured out his life unto death.” So scripture indicates that there will be a time of suffering for the unredeemed, but that time will end when they have finally suffered to death for sin and that death will stand eternally, so that the penalty that God has imposed upon sin will have been fully and finally carried out.

One thing which has generally escaped the popular mind with regard to the atonement is the fact that in Christ’s death, He not only saves the believer from sin and ultimate death but brings about a unity and restitution of all things (Acts. 3:21) so that the disharmony and rebellion brought about at man’s first sin is resolved and one more “God may be all in all.”

Scripture declares that Jesus reconciled all things. All disunity is due to man’s sin (Rom. 8:19–23). When the penalty is met there is no more disharmony. How could that be if after judgment billions of sinners who rejected the atoning death of Jesus are left alive to forever suffer and remain in rebellion and opposition to God? However alienated such people would be, they would still be a part of God’s creation, and His purpose would forever be thwarted. But all such alien sinners will have met a final death (called “the second death”) and there will be none to create disunity, for Christ’s death has reconciled all the rest, thus creating harmony, and making possible a new “Earth wherein dwells righteousness” (II Peter 3:13).

The ultimate penalty of sin is passed over by many on the grounds that it makes no difference, as long as we avoid it through faith in Christ. But faith in Christ focuses on His death for our sins, which ties it in with a question of the judgment for that sin. If the judgment upon sin is unclear, then so is the means by which it is removed, and many disturbing questions remain. Many who believe in Christ continue to be plagued with guilt, fear and insecurity. Such guilt and fear is removed when we see that the full weight of judgment was met on the cross by Christ’s death.

“While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

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