

SUNDAY ARTICLE

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How Did Jesus Suffer Eternal Punishment in Only 3 Hours?

Andrew Menkis

On the surface the logic of the atonement is straightforward.

We sin and are therefore under God's wrath. When Jesus died on the cross, He suffered the punishment that sin deserves. If we put our faith in Christ, we have eternal life.

If we dig a little deeper, however, we encounter a perplexing question revealed by two biblical teachings.

First, sin against God demands eternal punishment (Matthew 18:8; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 14:11; 20:10).

Second, Jesus died, was buried, and rose on the third day. He wasn't punished forever. He's no longer

experiencing God's wrath. He's seated at the right hand of God the Father (Hebrews 9:25–26).

These twin truths raise the question: How did Jesus receive the full punishment for sin (eternal damnation) if He didn't suffer eternally? To answer it, we must ask four additional questions that get at the logic of the atonement.

1. What Is Death?

Paul writes, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Death is the punishment for rebellion against God: when Scripture talks about it, it's not merely a biological category. God warned Adam that, if he ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, "in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Adam didn't drop dead the day he ate the fruit, but he *was* cast out of Eden.

Death, then, is fundamentally separation from God. And in its finality, death is eternity in hell.

God won't be entirely absent; for the damned He will be present as judge and punisher.

2. Why Is Hell Eternal?

Eternal punishment is fitting for at least two reasons. First, God made us to exist forever, so the choice to remain in rebellion and unbelief has eternal consequences. Second, sins committed against an infinite Creator are infinitely grievous. It would therefore seem that, to take our eternal

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sentence, Jesus would need to be eternally punished. From this we might deduce that either Jesus is still being punished by the Father (which the Bible denies), or His death isn't sufficient to atone for our sins, since He didn't receive the eternal punishment we deserve.

There's a third option.

Sin's punishment is eternal in relation to *time*, yet it is also infinite in a *qualitative* sense. In other words, there's a *temporal* component to the punishment for sin as well as a *completeness* component.

Imagine a teacher who punishes a student by making him write "I will not call people names" 100 times. Regardless of whether it takes 30 minutes or three hours, the punishment is not complete until he writes the sentence for the hundredth time. Something similar is going on with the atonement. If we make a distinction between the duration of punishment and the complete pouring out of God's wrath on sin, we can understand how Christ, an infinite being, took our punishment without spending eternity under God's wrath.

3. What Is Propitiation?

This word "propitiation" is used four times in the New Testament (Romans 3:23-25; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 1 John 4:10). It refers to a sacrifice that appeases or turns away God's righteous wrath. This sacrifice changes His relationship to us from one of anger to one of favour.

Each passage that contains this word teaches that Christ was the propitiation for our sins. As the perfect sacrifice, His death is able to reconcile God to sinners. The Bible tells us this was a one-time event. Jesus took our punishment in its fullness; the sacrifice won't happen again, nor is it an ongoing reality (Hebrews 9:24-28). This leads back to our dilemma: Can Jesus be our propitiation if He is not eternally punished? To answer, we must ponder the reality of hell.

4. Why Are Sinners in Hell?

People are in hell not just because of *what* they have done, but because of *who* they are. Everything we do flows out of our hearts, Jesus taught. And all sin flows from a heart in rebellion against God. If people persist in that rebellion without repentance until death, their fate is sealed. They're given over to what they desired in life, an existence at odds with God rather than in submission to Him. They're given over to an eternity of hatred toward God rather than worship – which is exactly what they preferred in life. No one would want to

suffer the torments of hell, yet it's true to say that God only sends people to hell who wanted to be apart from Him.

A distinction is needed here. People *enter* hell because of their choice to sin and refusal to repent; people *remain* in hell forever because they are sinners. It's not merely past sin, but also their present attitude that makes hell eternal for sinners. This is the key difference between sinful men and Jesus, the sinless man. He was perfect in every way; therefore, the duration of the punishment didn't need to be eternal for Him to absorb the complete punishment for sin.

The wrath of God was fully poured on Christ – and we shouldn't think that's contradicted or negated by the fact it occurred in a finite amount of time. To the contrary, the fact that Christ is no longer under the wrath of God, but seated in glory at His right hand, gives us every confidence that He is our Saviour.

Preach the Strange, Logical Gospel

The gospel makes sense. God doesn't contradict Himself or commit logical fallacies in His plan of salvation. And our presentation of the gospel should make sense to our hearers.

The better we understand the logic of the gospel and apply it in our own lives, the clearer we can explain it to others. Of course, not everyone who hears the gospel believes. But everyone who hears it should at least be

able to grasp its message.

When we preach the gospel, it may seem strange, offensive, or downright idiotic to our listeners. But it should never be incoherent, self-contradictory, or illogical if we've taken the time to meditate on the stunning logic of God's salvation plan.



Andrew Menkis (MAHT, Westminster Seminary California) lives in Maryland with his wife and daughter. Andrew is head of the theology department at Washington Christian Academy, where he teaches courses on biblical theology, systematic theology, film, and the writing of C S Lewis.

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