

# THE TRUTH ABOUT CONDEMNATION



BRAD JERSAK

**C**ondemnation. Such a chilling term! We associate condemnation with feelings of inescapable shame. As a legal term, even worse! The ultimate condemnation is when a judge sentences someone to death. But that's not truly the ultimate threat, is it? **The greater fear is that God himself will condemn us.**

The faith of my fathers threatened unbelievers with an everlasting state of condemnation: eternal conscious torment in a burning lake of fire and sulfur. Citing Romans 12:1, we believed only the faithful remnant (us) who were “in Christ Jesus” would escape the great exclusion.

I don't believe that anymore. This horrifies those *hellions* (a cheeky term for dogmatists who preach hellfire) who think I'm setting up unsuspecting victims for everlasting destruction by refusing to dangle it over their heads. I would counter that their ugly threats drive people away from God, not to him, and that a **conversion under compulsion is not conversion at all—it's just spiritual blackmail.**

If we're to know the truth about condemnation, we'd best get our information from the source: Christ himself. But even that's not so easy. If we compare the earliest and latest Gospels (Mark and

John), the Evangelists seem to have heard and understood Jesus slightly differently. In Mark 16:16, Jesus says, “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be [future] condemned.*”

But in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus describes condemnation as a state intrinsic to unbelief—a predicament we were *already* in and from which he's come to rescue us:

*“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands **condemned already** because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son”* (John 3:17-18).

Although different, notice how both texts avoid making God the active condemner. The cause and condition of our condemnation is unbelief. But the agent of our condemnation is *not God or his Son*. But still, Jesus raises the topic because he is committed to averting condemnation—past, present or future. We don't escape condemnation through denial or avoidance, so with Jesus, let's face it head-on:

In Mark 16, Jesus warns of a coming judgment for those who've not welcomed the grace of God

revealed in Christ. Some translate the Greek term *katakrima* as “damned,” though that’s excessive. More precisely, at least through legal eyes (let’s start there), it relates to a guilty verdict, sentencing and the execution of that verdict.

## CONDEMNED TO WHAT?

Yes, unbelief is “condemned” ... but to what? The *hellions* will say, “condemned to hell.” But that is by no means the only sense of judgment (*katakrima* or *krisis*) we see in Scripture. Indeed, Israel’s first “judges” (as in the book of Judges) were all *deliverers!*

We also see ample evidence in both the Old and New Testaments that our merciful Judge’s “sentence” can be a cleansing judgment that purifies the gold of our true selves and consumes only “that which is not of love’s kind” (to use George MacDonald’s phrase). The final judgment is pictured as “launderers soap and refiners fire” in Malachi 3 and purifying fire of 1 Corinthians 3.

In other words, **the judgments of God are not necessarily retributive—indeed, in view of God’s nature, they are necessarily *not* retributive.** The fiery judgment of God is directed solely at every fetter that binds us to self-destructive attachments and others-destructive ways. Imagine, for example, a judge who sentences an addict to an enforced course of rehabilitation in an addiction center (a common occurrence in my country).

Having said that, we discover in Hebrews 12 that the judgments of God are not those of a courtroom judge (punitive or otherwise). Rather, they are always and only to be regarded as *the restorative correction of a loving Father*, applied for our good to make us whole. Is *Abba’s* remedial justice only for believers and only for this life? Some would say so. I would not. And why not?

Because in his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has transformed death and hades from a destiny of non-being into a passageway to life ... that passage includes a *katakrima* of purification in the furnace of divine love. “Condemnation” is no longer ultimate. Mercy triumphs over judgment and now, only the love of God for his creatures is ultimate and eternal. Could one forever reject such love? It’s possible in principle (the principle of human freedom) but I believe it’s infinitely unlikely, given the ravishing beauty and

effectual power of Christ’s love for everyone.

## BEYOND LEGALESE

Let’s return to the question of legal (or “juridical”) metaphors that evoke courtrooms and judges, criminals and lawyers, convictions and sentencing ... in short, condemnation to retributive justice. We are not denying the reality of divine judgment or that Christ presides as the all-merciful Judge. We’re not ignoring the Day of the Lord in which Christ renders his judgments. But here are two all-important qualifying “riders”:

First, judicial imagery is *metaphorical*. It has a



**“... the judgments of God are not necessarily retributive—indeed, in view of God’s nature, they are necessarily *not* retributive.”**

*rhetorical* function, especially as Christ confronted complacency and defiance. **Biblical metaphors and rhetoric are never empty, but they are limited and mustn’t be totalized.** Judicial metaphors are only one of many salvation themes. Others include ransom from slavery, redemption from debt, healing from disease, to name just a few. In every one of them, Christ is *always* the hero, sent by his *Abba* to rescue us, heal us, free us, etcetera—*never* to condemn, just as Jesus told us in John 3.

Continued on page 13

at all times. It has been a tremendous blessing that just when I needed a particular song, it was there.

I remember one such experience from a few years back, when Russell, a dear friend in his eighties, lay in hospital dying (in fact, he died the following day). I went to visit him, but he was in a shared ward with no walls—an appalling situation. So I just lay my head next to him and sang the hymns quietly while he struggled to breathe. As I sang, tears flowed from his eyes. He couldn't speak. I sang *Amazing Grace*, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* and *Abide with Me*. All I could do was utter these hushed hymns of comfort in song to my friend, who could no longer speak and was nearing the end. I sang quietly because there were others in the room who were fit and well, looking on from other beds.

## OF GRACE AND MERCY

Here is the most amazing thing! When I sang *Abide with Me*, I noticed Russell start to mouth the words with me. At his funeral, *Just as I Am* was sung. Afterwards, the woman who helped arrange the funeral spoke with me, and I asked her about the song choice. She told me that Russell had wanted to have *Abide with Me* sung at the funeral, but that she and others felt it was too somber.

Can you imagine what my heart did at that moment? It turns out *Abide with Me* was actually Russell's favorite song and that's why he wanted it sung at his funeral, but I never knew that. That's why it was so amazing. I am still moved to this day knowing how our good Lord comforted my dear friend and brother with his favorite hymn the day before he passed. That's our kind and loving Lord whose "mercies are new morning by morning."

At the end of the day, I think we need to extend grace to each other even as we sing different types of worship songs and be tolerant of others' choices. Perhaps when we think of the music we are sharing as worship leaders (I've led worship in an Anglican church and for children's church too), we can encourage people to deeply think about the words they are singing. We can suggest that they find some hymns they enjoy and start to memorize them too, so they can sing those words whenever or wherever they feel the need. May worshipful words and music be a blessing through us all to others. □

*Blair Baker is an author, artist and children's book illustrator based in Marlborough, UK.*

## THE TRUTH ABOUT CONDEMNATION

BRAD JERSAK (continued from page 7)

Second, we reject any theory of *atonement* that says God *cannot* freely forgive, that God is *beholden* to wrath and that our release depends on the *appeasement* of God's anger through the violent punishment of his Son. That is a paganized perversion of biblical judicial terms. In other words, my theological revulsion is not to legal terms such as *katakrima* per se, but rather, to deriving from them blasphemous conceptions of God that require a brutal child sacrifice (his own) to assuage his holy fury before he can "forgive." That's not forgiveness at all! That ugly narrative is more accurately aligned with the false god Molech (see Jeremiah 32:35).

I reject the dominant modern gospel of retribution preached from so many pulpits across our continent—the same bad news message I once preached. When I saw through Christ's life and teachings that God is not a condemning judge, but rather, a consistently loving Father, I was able to move toward a more beautiful, ancient and yes, more biblical gospel. □

*Brad Jersak is the author of A More Christlike God and A More Christlike Way, published by CWR press.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*"God our Father, we find it difficult to come to you, because our knowledge of you is imperfect. In our ignorance of you, we have imagined you to be our enemy; we have wrongly thought that you take pleasure in punishing our sins; and we have foolishly conceived you to be a tyrant over human life. But since Jesus came among us, he has shown that you are loving, that you are on our side against all that stunts life, and that our resentments against you are groundless."*

—Augustine of Hippo