The Judgment of God

The Fact of God's Judgment:

Any casual reading of the Bible would reveal that God is a Judge (Ps. 50:6; 75:7; 82:8; 96:13; Isa. 5:16; Ja. 5:9; I Pet. 4:5 etc.).

To understand the judgment of God it is important to realize that God governs His world by law. This is demonstrated in a number of ways.

1. God is called the lawgiver (Isa. 33:22)
2. God's actions are seen as judgments (Exo. 6:6; 7:4; 12:12; Num. 33:4; Ezek. 5:10).
3. The phenomena in nature are governed by law (Job. 28:26; Jer. 5:22; 31:35-36)
4. The Bible is filled with legal terminology to depict the relationship of God to man (requital – Jdg. 1:7; Jer. 51:56; hearing a plea - Isa. 3:12-14; or, a court scene (Mic. 6:1 ff)
5. God also expects man to use judgment (Ps. 33:5; Prov. 21:3; Isa. 5:7, etc.)

From these examples it becomes clear that God works consistently by law. When Abraham said, "Shall not the Judge of the whole earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25), he expected God to act in accordance with a moral law. Unlike the heathen gods, the God of Israel was predictable in His dealings with man. His judgment fell in accordance with His standards, not capriciously like the gods of the nations. Thus, in Jeremiah 8:7 it says, "Even the stork in the heavens knows her appointed times ... but My people do not know the judgment of the LORD." Because God has a moral law His wrath was as certain as the movements of the birds, yet the people blissfully went their own way in spite of it.

The Necessity of God's Judgment:

Why does God punish sin instead of ignoring it?

As Creator and King, God has the right to dictate the standard of right and wrong for His creation, and because God is righteous, He demands His creation be righteous as well. But it must also be remembered that the law is not an arbitrary set of rules imposed upon mankind, rather it is a reflection of God's own nature. We are to be holy because God
is holy (I Pet. 1:15-16). The same holy nature of God that dictates the law must also punish those who disobey it. It is part of the nature of law to have penalties attached to it. If God tolerated or overlooked sin, He would be denying the law by which the universe is governed and by doing so He would compromise His own holiness.

The fact that God is Judge is therefore a witness to His character. It confirms what He has said elsewhere about His moral perfection. If God did not judge, He would demonstrate moral indifference. He would show that He didn't care if men were treated fairly or not. Instead He deals with men fairly and punishes those who deserve it.

The Basis of Judgment:

The Bible teaches that all men are sinful (Ro. 3:23) and are deserving of judgment (Ja. 2:10-11). It also teaches that salvation from God's wrath can only be attained by grace through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8-9; Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12). But because many have not heard of Christ, people wonder how God could be just in condemning them.

God's judgment is based on what men have done (Psa. 62:12; Pro. 24:12; Jer. 17:10; 25:14; Matt. 16:27; Jo. 5:29; Ro. 2:5-9; II Cor. 5:10; Rev. 2:23; 20:12-13) including actions done in secret (II Cor. 4:2; Eph. 5:12) and their response to revelation available to them. Those who have received greater revelation will have greater responsibility (Matt. 11:21-24; Mk. 10:15; Lk. 10:12-14; Ro. 2:12-16). Some sins will be judged more severely than others (Matt. 12:31; I Jo. 5:16; I Cor. 6:18). Each individual and each individual's sin will be taken into account. This does not imply that there are different conditions of salvation nor does it mean that relatively good people will be saved. Every sin, no matter how minute it appears to us is a serious offence to God and will be punished.

God will also judge the secrets of the heart (Ro. 2:16). Because God judges according to truth (Ro. 2:2) He includes the motive behind the action as well as the action itself.

Men will even be judged on what men say (Matt. 12:36).

God has revealed Himself in a number of ways, yet men respond differently to His revelation.

1. The Revelation of God in Creation.

The creation reveals the existence of a Creator. Examination of Psalm 19:1-6 reveals the extent and nature of this revelation.
Ps. 19:1-6

1 The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
   And the expanse is declaring the work of His hands.

2 Day unto day pours forth speech,
   And night unto night reveals knowledge.

   (The revelation of God in creation is constant. The heavens display the majesty and
   power of God moment by moment, day after day and night after night.)

3 There is no speech nor are there words their voice is not heard.

   (This revelation is not given in the form of human speech, but neither is it
   restricted by the diversity of language and expression. It transcends communication by
   words.)

4 Their line has gone out through all the earth, And their utterances to the end of
   the world.

   (There is no linguistic or geographic barrier.)

   In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun,

5 Which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
   It rejoices as a strong man to run its race.

6 Its rising is from one end of heaven,
   And its circuit to the other end;
   And there is nothing hidden from its heat.

   (Among the works in the heavens, the sun is the most conspicuous. The psalmist pictures its
   rising as coming out of a tent, its glory is compared to a bridegroom coming out of the bridal
   chamber and its strength to that of a strong man. From the perspective of the earth, the sun rises
   and makes its circuit with radiance and vigor. The warmth of the sun can be felt by all, even those
   who cannot see it.)

What the psalmist is saying is that the glory and wisdom of God are evident in the
splendor and vastness of the heavens. His glory is seen by all men everywhere at all times,
regardless of where they live or of the language they speak. Although belief in a Creator is
not sufficient to save, it should stimulate a search to know God. Yet as Romans 1:18-32
reveal, men suppress the knowledge given to them.
Romans 1:18-20.

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,
19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.
20 Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse;
21 for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.
22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,
23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.
24 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves,
25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

(Paul’s object is to prove the doctrine in the preceding verse, namely, that righteousness comes by faith. In order to do this he shows that righteousness through good works or the law is insufficient. Paul uses the remaining verses in chapter 1 to demonstrate the unrighteousness of the gentiles by painting a vivid picture of heathen religion and morals. Then in the opening verses of chapter 2 he demonstrates the futility of trying to obey the law to become righteous.

Though God has revealed His invisible attributes [such as His goodness, wisdom, and majesty, power and divine nature] through creation [1:20] the gentiles were neither thankful, nor did they glorify God. Instead of receiving knowledge about God they suppressed it [1:18] and perverted it by worshipping the creation rather than the Creator [1:23-25]. Against such unrighteousness the wrath of God is revealed [1:18] in that He gives men over to their vile passions [1:26] and to a corrupt mind [1:28]. He doesn’t hinder them from their self destructive and ungodly ways which will eventually be the basis for the final judgment of all men. The revelation of the wrath of God is itself evidence that men fall short of His righteous standards.)
2. The Revelation of God in Conscience.

God has not only provided man with an external witness of His existence in creation, He has also provided an internal witness within the heart of man. God has given every man a conscience, a God-given faculty which gives man a relative sense of moral right or wrong. God will not only judge man in accordance to his response to creation, He will also judge man based on his response to his conscience.

Ro. 2:12-16

12 For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law

(The previous verse [v.11] had just stated that there is no partiality with God in His judgments. This is confirmed in verse 6 where it says He will judge every man according to his works, and now by the fact that all men will be judged according to the light they have enjoyed. Those who sin without written revelation (the law) are treated less severely than those who are exposed to the light of God’s Word [also Matt. 11:21-24; Lk. 11:47-48; 20:47].)

13 (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified;

(Verse 13 begins a parenthetical section and gives the reason why those who have the law will be judged. If men rely upon the law to be justified they must be doers of the law and satisfy its demands. Paul is not insinuating that it is possible to be justified by the law [cf. Ro. 3:10-12; Ro. 3:23] but is describing the principles of justice. Having the law was not enough. The law was to be obeyed [Ja. 1:22; Matt. 5:21-22; Gal. 4:21]. Those who did not obey would be punished.)

14 When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.

15 They show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them)

(Among those who possess the law, only the doers will be justified. But those who are without the law will not be judged by the written law at all. They will be judged by the moral awareness God has placed within them.

Though all men don’t have the law of God, the same works which the Jews have prescribed in their law the gentiles also show to be written on their hearts. This is evident
by the fact that to some degree or another, men obey the law. A man who is kind, honors his parents, and pays his debts does the things of the law, for these are what the law prescribes. Abraham and Noah are good examples of men who did not have the law but loved the principles found in it. This moral code within man is not learned behavior, men act "by nature." That is, it is a basic part of the constitution of man who is made in the image of God [Gen.1:26-27].

Paul's object is to show that though the gentiles do not have the written law they do have a conscience that leads them to perform moral acts. They are their own law. They have a sense of moral obligation and duty. They have an inward monitor (the conscience) that condemns or approves their actions.)

16 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

(Verse 16 picks up where verse 12 left off. Both those who have the law and those who don't will perish because whatever standard they are judged by they will be found to be deficient when the secrets of their hearts are revealed. Those who seek justification by the law will be found guilty, for no one can perfectly follow its precepts. The gentiles will also be found guilty for ignoring their conscience and committing evil acts. Whether one has the law or not, all are found to be sinners.)

3. The Revelation of God in His Providential Care Over Nature.

Just as creation and conscience form a basis of judgment, so does man's response to God's care of creation.

Acts 14:15-17 (cf. Matt. 5:45)

15 ... "We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them,
16 "who in past generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways.
17 "Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness."

(In the past, God allowed men to walk in their own ways before fuller revelation appeared. Yet the ignorance of the people about God should not have been as great as it really was, for God had ordered the seasons to give food to them which should have made
them mindful of His care. His care provided ample witness of His goodness, but like His revelation in creation, it was ignored).

**Summary / Conclusion:**

In answer to the question of how God could be just in condemning those who have never heard the gospel, the following is offered.

The Bible clearly teaches that God is not partial or unfair in His judgment. Though all will face judgment, all will not be judged by the same criteria. Those who have heard the gospel and reject it will be held accountable for their action. Those who have not heard it will be accountable for the revelation they had received. All men have been exposed revelation in creation, conscience, and God’s providence. All men must respond to the light they have no matter how limited it is. Although men may feel that they have not received ample revelation to lead them to God, when God reveals the secrets of their hearts it will be found that they suppressed (Ro. 1:18) and perverted (Ro. 1:25) the little light they had. God’s judgment will prove to be just.

On the positive side, God’s revelation in these areas is also an impetus that causes men to seek Him further and His plan of salvation (I Chr. 28:9; Jer. 29:13; Matt. 7:7, 8; Heb. 11:6; Acts 8:26-40).

**The Nature of Justification:**

The meaning of justification can only be understood in a forensic setting. It is part of the process of judgment. When men have a controversy they go before the judge. The process whereby their dispute is resolved is called “judgment.” When the verdict is given in favor of a party, that person is said to be “justified.” He is declared (not made) righteous. He has reached the standard of the law and is acquitted of the accusation.

In the same way the Bible teaches that only those who conform to the will of God (i.e. are righteous) will be accepted and secure the verdict of acquittal. Conformity is the standard; justification is the legal process by which this conformity is declared. The problem becomes immediately apparent once one realizes that man is unable to meet the standards of God revealed in the law. The Jews tried to be justified through the merits of their own acts or deeds but failed. Based on his own acts or deeds man will surely be condemned (Ro. 3:10-12; 3:28; Gal. 2:16; 3:11).

However, obtaining righteousness is linked to faith, not works (Ro. 4:13; 9:30-31; 10:6; Phil. 3:9). Justification by faith includes the fact that man is accepted in the sight of God on account of His divine mercy and forgiveness apart from his works (Ps.13:5; 33:20-22; Isa. 55:1-6; Mic. 7:18; Hab. 2:4; Ro. 4:1-5 etc.). In other words, a positive verdict is
given to the sinner if he has faith in God’s mercy and forgiveness that are tied to the
death of Christ on the cross as a substitute for our sins. The punishment for sin, the
fulfillment of the justice of God, was satisfied in Christ. A man therefore becomes
righteous, acceptable before God, when he places His trust in the sacrifice God provided.

If the grounds for acceptance by God is faith in Christ, then conformity to God’s
will (righteousness) is also through faith (Ro. 3:21-26). The man who believes in Christ, who
stakes His whole life on the work of the Savior, is not fictitiously regarded as right
before God; he actually is right with God, and God treats him as such.