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# VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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## LECTURE 23: ATONEMENT

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**The John Knox Institute**  
of Higher Education

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

**John Knox Institute of Higher Education**

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# *Module*

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## **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

**30 LECTURES**

***ROBERT D. McCURLEY M.Div.***

**21 CHAPTERS OLD TESTAMENT · 9 CHAPTERS NEW TESTAMENT**

### *Old Testament Lectures:*

1. Introduction
2. Creation
3. Fall
4. Noah
5. Abraham
6. Patriarchs I
7. Patriarchs II
8. Exodus
9. Sinai
10. Tabernacle
11. Sacrifices
12. Priesthood
13. Inheritance
14. David
15. Psalms
16. Solomon
17. Temple
18. Kingdom
19. Prophets
20. Exile
21. Restoration

### *New Testament Lectures:*

22. Incarnation
- 23. Atonement**
24. Resurrection
25. Pentecost
26. Church
27. Union
28. Application
29. Mission
30. Glory

## *Lecture 23*

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# **ATONEMENT**

*Lecture Theme:*

God condescends to reveal his glory through Christ's finished work of atonement.

*Text:*

“For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified”  
(1 Cor. 2:2).

### **TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 23**

The world cannot see spiritual realities. They're blind, groping about in the darkness of unbelief. Paul says that they look upon the cross and consider it foolishness. What could be more foolish than the apparent weakness of a leader, a king, a savior, who suffers the ultimate defeat of gruesome execution? This does not display the kind of power the world esteems. On the face of these dismissive criticisms, God reveals the truth to us, truth that exposes the world's ignorance. The cross manifests the wisdom and power of God, His upholding divine justice, while granting mercy in securing the salvation of His people. Christ's crucifixion appeared to the human eye as colossal defeat, but in fact, in that very moment God displayed His greatest triumph. Christ won the victory over sin, Satan, death, and hell, and He did so not in spite of the cross but through the cross. So, we can say with Paul in I Corinthians 1:18, “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”

How does the growing momentum of what we learned in the Old Testament culminate in Christ's work of atonement? How do those Old Testament theological themes come to full expression in the New Testament? Why is the cross central to the New Testament and the Bible as a whole? What are the various components of the atonement, and what do they teach us about the content of the gospel? What exactly did the cross secure in terms of salvation, and for whom did Christ die? In this lecture, we turn our attention to one of the greatest events in God's history of redemption. But first, we should distinguish between the object of accomplishment of salvation and the subjective application of redemption. So, the former speaks of Christ's work for us, whereas the latter pertains to Christ's work in us. In these first four lectures on the New Testament, we're primarily focusing on the object of accomplishment of salvation; that is Christ's work for us. And, some of the latter lectures will concentrate on the application of salvation to the believer, namely, Christ's work in us. But, they must always be

held together in biblical balance. To focus on one to the exclusion of the other would distort the Bible's gospel message. So, let's turn our attention to this theme of atonement.

First of all, we'll note the historical unfolding of this theme of atonement. The revelation of God's plan of redemption began, as you'll remember, in Genesis 3:15, "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." Christ's crushing the head of the serpent comes to full fruition in His incarnate work, but in the process, Christ's heel is bruised, a reference to His work on the cross. We read in I John 3:8, "He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil." This is further confirmed, for example in Colossians 2:15, "And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made in a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it." The whole history of the Old Testament foretold of this grand work, and the New Testament spells out the fulfillment in Christ.

So, regarding the exodus, we read in I Corinthians 5:7, "For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." The New Testament opens with John the Baptist's declaration, "Behold, the Lamb of God," and the New Testament ends with that same image. In Revelation 5:12, there is a picture of Christ in heaven after His ascension, and we read, "Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing." References to the Lamb can be found all the way to the end of the book in chapter 21:14.

As we will explore below, Christ fulfills the Old Testament themes of surety, sacrifice, substitute, ransom, redemption, and so on. The point I want to establish is that your understanding of these New Testament concepts will be very limited without a thorough grasp of the Old Testament theology. The four Gospels reveal the history of Christ's work on earth, each of them contributing a different emphasis. We read of His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. You'll notice that all four Gospels devote a significant proportion of space to everything leading up to and surrounding Christ's crucifixion. For example, nearly half of the book of John is devoted to that last week of Christ's life and the events of His death. The rest of the New Testament is devoted to expounding the implications of Christ's work, especially His atonement. This is why Paul says, "For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:2).

So, secondly, we want to especially focus in this lecture on the theology of the cross, so the theology of the cross: we must see that God provides a revelation of Himself through Christ's atoning work. So, God is showing us Who He is through what He does. God cannot change. He is a holy and righteous God, so His provision of salvation must correspond to His own character. The true gospel is the only means of accomplishing this, which is why when Paul teaches the gospel, he says in Romans 3:26, "To declare, I say, at this time his," that is God's, "righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." How can God remain just and still be the justifier of those who are obviously ungodly? The gospel provides the only answer. So, for example, His justice is upheld in the full punishment of sin and the satisfaction of His wrath by placing it on Christ as the Substitute standing in the place of His people. He manifests His magnificent love for His people, bringing together at the cross both His justice and His love.

We will explore under this point the language and theology found in the New Testament. Let me highlight especially four major examples regarding the theology of the cross. The first is sacrifice, the theme of sacrifice. This is a dominant theme throughout the Scriptures and an important part of the role of the Mediator in offering up Himself as a sacrifice. So, Ephesians 5:2 says, "Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savor." As you know, the entire Old Testament economy with its sacrificial system pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ. The central idea in this doctrine is that of substitution. This is what is meant by a vicarious sacrificial atonement. *Vicarious* refers to the substitute, Christ, is our penal substitute. He stands in the place of His people and atones for their sin.

As we learned in an earlier lecture, this atoning sacrifice included both expiation and propitiation. These are two big theological words, but they have a simple and important meaning. *Expiation* refers to blotting out and removing sin, more specifically, taking away the guilt of sin. Revelation 1:5 says, "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood." But, there's also *propitiation*, and this refers to satisfying divine justice and appeasing the wrath of God. We read in Romans 5:8-9, "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be

saved from wrath through him.” Though some object to this aspect of the atonement, it is an indispensable part of the gospel. God, by His nature as a righteous and just God, must reflect wrath toward all sin. So, that wrath must be removed through Christ’s death, His death, to satisfy divine justice, I John 4:10, “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

A second theme under the theology of the cross is reconciliation. So, we read one of many examples in Romans 5:10–11, “For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.” Reconciliation is an important part of this theme of atonement and of the theology of the cross. Reconciliation refers to the removal of our enmity with God; so Christ’s atonement eliminates our alienation from God, and it, rather, restores friendship and fellowship with God. This is good news indeed, a message that must be proclaimed in the gospel; and it is an important part of preaching. Listen to Paul’s description in II Corinthians 5:18–20, “And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”

So, the first theme is sacrifice. The second is reconciliation. A third theme is redemption: Ephesians 1:7, “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.” Redemption refers to our deliverance and the payment of a price to buy us back to Himself, the idea of ransom. This concept was obviously prominent in the Old Testament; the whole event of the Exodus from Egypt was about redemption. You have the same theme in the sanctifying of the firstborn and in the concept of the kinsman redeemer, which comes out not only in the law but is exemplified in the book of Ruth and so on. All of this is crystal clear in the New Testament. This includes the idea of Christ as our Surety. As Surety, He assumed to Himself the responsibility of paying the debt for the sins of His people. The New Testament also makes clear that Christ was the ransom. The price paid for our redemption was the bloodshed of our Savior. Christ refers to Himself in Mark 10:45 when He says, “to give his life a ransom for many.”

More specifically, God’s people are redeemed from spiritual bondage, and you can see this under, really, four points. God’s people are redeemed from spiritual bondage. First of all, they’re redeemed from the bondage of sin, its guilt, its defilement, its power, and so on. So, we read in Titus 2:14 of Christ “Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, . . . zealous of good works.” Secondly, God’s people are redeemed from the curse of the law. Galatians 3:13 says, “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.” Thirdly, God’s people are redeemed from the works of the devil. You see this in I John 3:8, for example. Fourthly, the Lord’s people are redeemed from the power of death. Hebrews 2:14 says, “that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death.” This is brought up beautifully at the end of I Corinthians 15 as well. So, redemption is another important component of the theology of the cross and of our understanding of the atonement.

A fourth theme is that of obedience, and we often explain this under both Christ’s active and His passive obedience. So, salvation requires obedience to God. That’s clear, but theologians distinguish between two aspects. These are aspects: Christ’s active and His passive obedience. Both of these describe the whole of Christ’s work. Remember the end of II Corinthians 5:21, “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” Let me explain this briefly. Christ’s active obedience refers to the fulfilling of what the law requires. So, God requires perfect obedience to His law in order to have to be acceptable in His sight. Christ in His life obeyed on behalf of His people the precepts of the law, the full requirements of the law, thereby obtaining a record of perfect righteousness, perfect law-keeping. And, Christ’s perfect righteousness is imputed or credited to His people and received by them by faith. There is His act of obedience.

Secondly, there is His passive obedience. This refers to Him suffering the penalty required by the law. So, God’s law also demands a just penalty for sin. Christ pays the penalty of the law and bears its curse in the place of His people: Philippians 2:8, “And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” So, this theme of obedience in connection to the atonement and the

theology of the cross can be traced through the New Testament as well. In summary, under the second point notice how Christ's atonement corresponds to all of our needs.

We looked at four different things. First of all, sacrifice corresponds to our problem of guilt and wrath. Reconciliation corresponds to our problem of enmity and alienation from God. Redemption corresponds to the problem of bondage, and obedience corresponds to the problem of the demands of God's law. In other words, the theology of the cross is perfectly suited to the needs of God's people and bringing them a full salvation. The cross was necessary. God could not have redeemed His people another way. For example, He could not have redeemed them by merely declaring the forgiveness of their sins. This is because God's justice had to be upheld. Christ's work on the cross provides essential content to the message of the true gospel. God reveals what He has accomplished for the salvation of His people, and the cross is an exhibition of both God's justice and His love. We see in the cross what we sing of in Psalm 85:10, "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other."

Thirdly, in this lecture, we need to consider the extent of the atonement. So lastly, we need to take up the question, "Who are the recipients of the blessings of the atonement?" Or, another way of asking the question is this: For whom did Christ die? This is an often misunderstood doctrine. There is a system of theology called Arminianism that teaches that Christ died for all men, atoned for the sins of all men, but contrary to this incorrect teaching, the Bible teaches that Christ died for His own elect people. This is important, and it's important because it affects our understanding of the very nature of the atonement itself as you'll see. This doctrine fits within the broader context of what the Bible teaches about man's total depravity and spiritual inability and God's election, His sovereign choice of His people. So, when asking the question, for whom did Christ die?, let's think for a second about the scope of that question. And, it may help to first of all state what is not being questioned. The gospel is to be proclaimed to every last person in the world. Salvation is preached indiscriminately to all those who hear the gospel, and the sufficiency of Christ's work is not being questioned.

On the other side, what is being stated is this: the extent of the atonement - who are the recipients of its blessings? - is rooted in the nature of the atonement itself. That's what's being highlighted here. Christ did not merely create the hypothetical potential for some to be saved. He actually secured and accomplished salvation certainly, definitively, for His elect, chosen people. Since all Christians believe that not everyone goes to heaven, the question is, "Who limits the atonement? God or man? The answer is: God sets the parameters for the atonement. We also need to recognize an understanding of what's being stated. We need to recognize that the sin of unbelief and, correspondingly, the gift of faith are secured in the atonement itself. When Christ died, He died for the sin of unbelief, and He died to secure the gift of faith.

We also recognize that Christ's love for His own bride is different from His disposition toward the rest of the world, and we should note there cannot be a double payment. What does that mean? It means it cannot be the case that Christ pays for the sins of all men, and then some unbelievers must pay for that same sin again in hell. That makes no sense. The whole Bible teaches this particularism: God provides atonement for His chosen people. We see it in the Old Testament. God out of the counsel of His own will chose a particular people for Himself, Israel, as distinguished from the rest of the world, and He provided salvation for them. So, for example, in Deuteronomy 7:6-8 we read, "For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

The whole sacrificial system in the Old Testament taught the same truth. The sacrifices, which signified atonement, were applied to a particular people, not the whole world. We could consider a host of other texts. Think, for example, of the pronouns used at the end of Isaiah 52 beginning at verse 13 and through Isaiah 53. We see the same thing in the New Testament from the opening page. In Matthew 1:21 we read, "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins." Jesus teaches the same thing in John 10:14-15, "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep." Throughout Christ's high

priestly prayer in John 17, He makes repeated references to those whom the Father had given Him, and He says in verse 9, “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.” Paul charges the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” We could provide more texts, but this should suffice.

Let me now tie these various threads together by laying out the biblical argument as a whole, and we’re going to turn to John Owen, a 17th century English Puritan, who spells this out very clearly. Listen carefully and try to follow along with what he says. The biblical argument regarding the fact that Christ died for His elect people goes like this:

“The Father imposed His wrath and the Son underwent punishment for either: 1) all the sins of all men, 2) all the sins of some men, or 3) some of the sins of all men. In which case it may be said,” first of all, “that if the last be true,” that Christ was punished for some of the sins of all men, then “all men have sins to answer for, and so none are saved.” We can take that off the list. Secondly, “if the second be true,” that Christ died for all the sins of some men, “then Christ, in their stead suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the whole world, and this is the position that is true,” but thirdly, and this is addressing the Arminians, “if the first be the case,” that Christ died for all the sins of all men, “why are not all men free from the punishment due unto their sins? You answer Because of unbelief.” Owen says, “Then I ask is this unbelief a sin, or is it not? If yes, it is a sin, then Christ suffered the punishment due for it, or He did not. If He did, why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which He died? But if He did not die for that sin, then He did not die for all of their sins.”

You can see here the force of the biblical argument as it is nicely and compactly summarized by John Owen. The answer to the question regarding the extent of the atonement — for whom did Christ die? — the answer the Bible gives is Christ died for His elect people. Let me illustrate the implications of this doctrine for Christian experience. What would you think of a husband [who] told his wife that he loves her but that he also loves all the other women in the world just the same as he loves her? Well, you would be terribly offended, and rightly so. When the Christian looks at the cross, he sees Christ’s particular love for His bride, not a generic love of a nebulous, undefined mass of humanity. Christ carried His specific people on His heart and in His mind when He offered Himself as a sacrifice for their sins. This is a great aid to the assurance of God’s love. The Christian can say, “Christ was securing the atonement for my sins in particular and securing them in love for me.”

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture we have concentrated our focus on Christ’s sacrificial work, His work of atonement. We see that God condescends to reveal His glory through Christ’s finished work of atonement. The gospel is the heart of the Bible, and Christ’s atonement is the heart of the gospel. In the next lecture, we will explore the next great event in God’s history of redemption. After His death comes the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, we will consider together this event of the resurrection of Christ and its implications for the salvation of God’s people.