

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

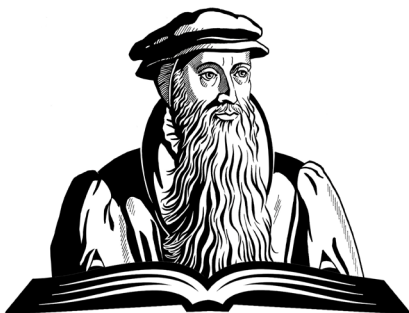
by Dr. Stephen Myers and Robert D. McCurley, ThM

*Module 4:*

### CHRISTOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

*Lecture 7*

### THE NECESSITY OF THE ATONEMENT



The John Knox Institute  
of Higher Education

## **John Knox Institute of Higher Education**

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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## Video Lecture Series

by Dr. Stephen Myers and Robert D. McCurley, ThM

### *Module 4 ~ Christology*

Lectures by Dr. Stephen Myers:

1. Introduction to Christology
2. The Divinity of Christ
3. The Humanity of Christ

Lectures by Robert D. McCurley, ThM:

4. The Hypostatic Union
5. The States of Christ
6. The Offices of Christ
- 7. The Necessity of the Atonement**
8. The Nature of the Atonement
9. The Extent of the Atonement
10. The Preeminence of Christ

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

## *Module 4 ~ Lecture 7*

# The Necessity of the Atonement

History has what we might call low points and high points. In some periods, significant developments occur, and in other periods, less notable events seem to happen. But what is the greatest event in history? Well, surely it must also include the most important person or people in history. As Christians, we know that answering this question requires knowing that at the center of history is God's unfolding plan of redemption. Everything else in history serves as window dressing. Everything revolves around and contributes to the purposes of the kingdom of God's Son. Consequently, the greatest period in history pertains to the coming of Jesus Christ. Most of the world even marks the years of time by the designations "BC"—before Christ, and "AD"—the year of our Lord, the years that follow Christ. He is the most important person the world has ever known. And the greatest event in history was Christ's work of atoning for the sins of his people. It is to Christ's work, his work of atonement that we now turn.

This series of lectures in this fourth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the Doctrine of Christ. We have explored what the Bible teaches us about the person and work of Christ. In the previous lectures, we focused our attention on the person of Jesus Christ. We now turn to consider how the person of Christ relates to the work of Christ, especially the atonement for sin. So in this lecture, we will explore the Necessity of the Atonement, and in the next lecture, we'll consider the doctrinal details pertaining to the Nature of the Atonement.

So first of all, we'll begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of the Necessity of the Atonement. In Hebrews 9, the second half of verse 26 through the beginning of verse 28 says, "But now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many."

The book of Hebrews sets forth the superiority and supremacy of the person of Jesus Christ, and it calls men to saving, persevering faith in his person and work. In the middle section of the book, it focuses on how Christ fulfills the Old Testament types that pointed forward to the glory of Christ, as both the sacrifice for sin and the Priest who offers the sacrifice, when he offered himself as the atonement for sin. Well, this brings us to the culmination of history—the end of the world, as Hebrews 9, verse 26 says. Well, the greatest need of mankind pertains to his sin. Sin separates man from God, placing man in a position of alienation and enmity. Sin brings defilement, and guilt, and a curse, and the penalty of everlasting punishment. As long as man is left in his fallen state, his fallen state of sin, he is without God, and without hope in this world. Man is destitute, and the judgment of God follows man's inevitable death. Only God can provide the solution, which he

does in the sending of his Son. Christ came to deal with sin, to put away sin, to remove sin as the barrier between God and sinners. But how does he do this? He does it by way of a sacrifice for sin. He offers himself as the sacrifice to bear the sins of his people. As Hebrews 10, verse 14 goes on to say, “For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.”

The gospel is the heart of the Bible, and Christ’s atonement is the heart of the gospel. The New Testament opens with John the Baptist’s declaration, “Behold, *the* Lamb of God,” and it ends with the same image—Revelation 5, verse 12, says, “Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is *the* Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory and blessing.” Well, the rest of the New Testament is devoted to expounding the implications of Christ’s work. This is why Paul says, “For I determined not to know any thing among you save Jesus Christ, and him crucified”—1 Corinthians 2, verse 2. Well, over the next few lectures, we will be exploring the Doctrine of the Atonement. It is the necessity of the atonement that we will consider in this lecture.

And so, secondly, let’s then consider some of the doctrinal details regarding the Necessity of the Atonement. We’re introduced to the Doctrine of the Atonement in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 8, paragraph 5. It says, “The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him.”

Well, we first need to define our words. We know that the word “atonement” deals with the sacrifice of Christ’s death on the cross, but what does this entail? The atonement secures the remission of sin, the removal of the guilt of sin, the cleansing from the defilement of sin, satisfying God’s wrath against sin, the redemption of sinners. All of this through Christ’s obedience and the shedding of his blood, as the ransom and substitutionary sacrifice for his people. The atonement is Christ’s work that results in the reconciliation of sinners to God. The word, English word, “atonement” puts three English words together. If you take atonement and break it into three parts, at-one-ment. And so, atonement deals with those who were opposed being made one. Those who were enemies are made one. They’re reconciled. And Christ’s atonement was perfectly efficacious. It secured and insured the salvation of the elect. We’ll explore in detail some of these concepts I’ve just mentioned, in the next lecture under the Nature of Atonement. But for now, you can clearly see that Christ’s sacrificial atonement is at the heart of the Christian faith.

Well, we can further distinguish between the objective accomplishment of salvation, and the subjective application of redemption. The former, the accomplishment, speaks of Christ’s work for us. Whereas, the latter, the application, pertains to Christ’s work in us. Christ’s work for us—Christ’s work in us. Redemption accomplished—redemption applied. Well, in these lectures, we’re primarily focused on the objective accomplishment of salvation—Christ’s work for us. In the 5th module on Systematic Theology, we will concentrate on the application of salvation to the believer—Christ’s work in us. But these two things 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.

Well, in considering the Necessity of the Atonement, we’ll begin with the sinner’s need—the need of sinners. The word “gospel” means “good news”—the good news of salvation found in Christ alone. But you cannot understand and appreciate the good news without first grasping the bad news about sin and sinners. God is the one who made all things good, and created them for his own glory. God owns what he creates, including mankind. Man is therefore accountable to God and under his authority. Man’s sin erupts in this world from rebellion against God himself, and man

is entirely at fault. Sin, at its core, is not being or doing what God requires. And what he requires is found in the revelation of his Word. So sin is transgressing God's law, or not conforming ourselves to it. First John 3, verse 4 confirms this. It says, "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law." And there are two sides to this coin. On one side, you have the sins of commission—doing what the law forbids. On the other side, you have the sins of omission—not doing what the law demands. Ultimately, because the law reflects the character of God, to violate the law is to attack God himself. It is open war and rebellion—every sin against God. And this results in catastrophic misery. All the miseries of this life are traced back to the presence of sin. As the Bible says, "The way of the transgressor is hard." But man's sin also results in God's curse for his disobedience—"The wages of sin is death." Well, you may be wondering, Why then do sinners not die as soon as they sin? Well, we need to understand the kind and the extent of death that this includes. We'll note three things.

There's, first of all, spiritual death. Sinners are spiritually dead outside of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is speaking of the corruption of the soul. In Paul's words, man is "dead in trespasses and sins"—Ephesians 2, verse 1. So he lost communion with God and can no longer do anything that pleases God. He is dead to doing good. He can only sin. So people can be physically alive, their heart's beating, their brain's working, they're blinking, and breathing, and all of that sort of thing. You can have a live body and a dead soul at the same time, to be spiritually dead in transgression. So that's the first kind of death.

Secondly, there's physical death, so man's body will also die. In the genealogy from Adam to Noah given to us in Genesis 5, we have repeated over and over the words, "and he died," like the repeated gong of a bell ringing out the death toll. And so sin results in man's physical death. Everyone dies.

But then thirdly, there is eternal death. This is the sentence of eternal death. His soul and body are under the wrath and curse of God, and outside of the Lord Jesus Christ, man's soul and body will suffer the pains of hell for all of eternity. This is eternal damnation—the eternal death that comes as a consequence of sin.

And so that paints the backdrop in terms of man's sin. God reveals himself as the infinitely just Judge. Romans 1, verse 18: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." So sin must be weighed against the one who is sinned against. The least sin is a sin against an infinite God, therefore it warrants an everlasting punishment. Tragically, by the fall, man lost communion with God. The heart of the curse is separation from God, both in time, and ultimately eternity. Man's sin brought guilt, a guilty sentence against the objective standard of God's Word. It brought defilement or pollution. The guilt and pollution brought shame. Adam hid himself from God's presence. He covered his nakedness with fig leaves. He was now distant, alienated, and at enmity with God. Shame and disgrace are the opposite of glory and honor. Romans 3, verse 23, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Furthermore, man is thrust out of God's presence. Man is cut off from the presence of God. Isaiah 59, verse 2 says, "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear." You can read that whole chapter. All of these truths reinforce the great need from man's side for the atonement for sin.

But there's more, because there are two parties that must be reconciled: God and man. So we must also face the realities that emerge from the nature and character of God. The attributes of God reveal who God is, in his very being, not just what God does. He is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in all of his being. Therefore, his attributes cannot be altered, or diminished, or laid

aside. Because God must be all that he is. He cannot not be God, or cease to be all that he is. So he, for example, is perfectly and unchangeably holy, just, and righteous. He abhors all sin, the least sin, every sin, in every person, everywhere. This creates an insuperable hurdle for man, if left to himself. Man must be saved—saved from sin, saved from himself, saved from hell, but also saved from the wrath of God, which is rightly due for sin. Romans 2, verse 5, “But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

Sinners—this need that sinners have prepares us for the Necessity of the Atonement. And so secondly, let’s think then about the Necessity of the Atonement itself. So we’ve seen the problem. Man is sinful. He cannot remove his own sin, or the penalty for sin. God is holy, and God cannot cease to be holy and righteous. His justice, therefore, requires the execution of his wrath against all sin. There’s no wiggle room in either direction. So what is the solution? Man’s own perfection is not an option because it’s not within his power, and therefore not possible. It is not an option for God to lay aside his justice, because he cannot change or cease to be all that he is. The solution must account for man’s sin, and comply with God’s nature. What is needed is atonement, precisely the kind of atonement God provides in the sacrifice of his Son.

So first of all, nothing outside of God himself required him to save. Nothing can be required of God outside of himself. And so, furthermore, God was not obligated by his nature or his honor to save anyone. What’s that mean? His decree to save the elect was entirely according to the counsel of his free and sovereign will, his own good pleasure. But, in sovereignly determining to save sinners, that salvation obviously had to correspond to all that God is in his unchangeable being. The way of salvation had to be in keeping with his character as a holy, righteous and just God, not in contradiction to it. So in decreeing to save sinners, it was necessary for atonement to come, by satisfaction of divine justice, through the shedding of innocent blood, by one who was both God and man, standing as a substitute, in the place of God’s people. And in doing so, God provides a revelation of himself, through Christ’s atoning work. Do you see this? He is showing us who he is through what he does.

Again, God cannot change. 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 righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.” Well, how can he remain just, and be the justifier of those who are ungodly? The atonement provides the only answer. 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 sinful people. And in doing so, he also manifests his magnificent love for his people, in giving himself freely, willingly, voluntarily, as the sacrifice for sin. The atonement was necessary. God could not have redeemed his people by merely declaring the forgiveness of sins. No, his justice had to be upheld. Christ’s work on the cross provides essential content to the message of the gospel, revealing what he has accomplished for the salvation of his people. The cross is an exhibition of both God’s justice, and his wrath. We see in the cross what we sing of in Psalm 85, verse 10, “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”

Well, this reinforces the enormity of the penalty paid on the cross. The atonement was necessary, but it was necessary that it be secured by a mediator who was both God and man. It was necessary that he be God, so that he might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God and the power of death. He had to be God in order to give worth and efficacy to his

sufferings and obedience, not in the place of one sinner—one for one—but in the place of all of his elect—one for all of his redeemed people. As one who was God, he satisfied the infinite justice of God, purchased a redeemed people, and brought them to everlasting salvation. But it was also necessary that the mediator should be man, so that he could perform obedience to the law in our nature. He had to be man in order to suffer and die as the substitution for sin. The divine nature can't die. And he had to be man as well in order to carry out the other aspects of his mediation on our behalf.

What a remarkable and glorious accomplishment! Truly, this is the greatest event in history. The sight of Christ's sacrifice continues in heaven. Revelation 5, verse 6 and verse 9: "And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne...stood a Lamb as it had been slain...And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and has redeemed us to God by thy blood." This helps us understand the Necessity of the Atonement, looking at it from various angles.

But next, we turn to the polemical consideration of this doctrine of the Necessity of the Atonement. First of all, anyone who downplays the message about man's sin, downplays the glory of Christ's salvation. For those who say, "We don't want to preach about sin; we don't want to emphasize sin; we don't want to talk about the lostness of man, and the damnation that's deserved," and so on, that actually undermines, it strips some of the glory of Christ's glorious salvation. So beware of that.

Secondly, recognize that the denial of the atonement is a denial of the gospel, and therefore the rejection of all hope of salvation. If people decide they want to tinker with the doctrine of the atonement—we'll be learning much more about it in the next couple of lectures—they are on very dangerous ground. They are to say, "Well, Christ doesn't need to be considered a substitute in the place of his people," or, "The shedding of blood is not necessary," or, "We ought not to think about God's wrath being poured out upon his Son," and so on—all of this results in a denial of the gospel, which results in no hope of salvation. And so, let us defend vehemently, strongly this Biblical doctrine of atonement.

Thirdly, we've seen once again that we cannot separate who God is from what God does. These two things are held together. That when we're watching what it is that God is doing, he's actually revealing who he is to us. And we begin with who God is to understand what God does, and what God doesn't do. We've noted that, how the unchanging character of God lies behind the very way in which he atones for sin. It has to be in keeping with his being.

Fourthly, let me just give you a highlight here on some views on the Necessity of the Atonement. There are those who wrongly say that it was not necessary. So the unbelieving, liberal theologians maintain that God is a gracious God, and he can just show mercy without any price, and without any sacrifice, and so on. That's not what the Bible teaches. But then there's this view that God was actually obligated to save men in order to preserve his own honor, that mankind could not perish completely. Now, that too undermines the glory of God. It's not true. God was not obligated to save men. He chose to save men, out of the counsel of his own sovereign and free will, and for his own good pleasure. And there are others who say, "No, no." They reject those two positions I've just highlighted, and they maintain that God didn't have to save sinners, but when he chose to save sinners, he could have save them in a variety of ways. God could have made atonement in some other way—like granting forgiveness by sovereign declaration. The problem with this view is what we saw in this lecture, and that is, how can you have an atonement by simply declaring forgiveness? Because you have to deal with God's holiness, and righteousness, and justice. His



wrath has to be satisfied. So that doesn't present itself as a credible position either. And so you can see how these different angles compare to what we saw in our exposition.

Lastly, we can now draw a few practical applications for ourselves. The first thing is bringing home to our hearts the fact that all sin must be punished—period. All sin must be punished, everywhere, no exceptions. Indeed, all sin will be punished. The question is this—it is either punished in you or in him. It's all punished. But is it punished in you, in everlasting fire in hell? Or are your sins punished in him, in Christ, in his atoning sacrifice upon the cross. Now, that's helpful for ourselves. It's helpful in speaking to others about the gospel as well.

We also find a great deal of comfort in realizing that the source of Christ's once-for-all and final sacrifice is found in the love of God for his people. In the well-known words of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Or as Romans 5, verse 8 says, "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." If we're really soaking ourselves in this doctrine, it should cause the love of God to be shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. And our souls, if we're in Christ and saved by his blood, we ought to be experiencing the joy of the love of God toward such unworthy sinners.

Thirdly, and lastly, Paul says, "For I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified." This is the chief thing in all preaching, in all pastoring, in our personal experience, in our families, and in our lives, Christ crucified at the center. We ought to be adoring Christ's person, and the display of his glory through the work of his atoning sacrifice.

Well, we've been considering, in previous lectures, Christ's person, and in this lecture, we have introduced Christ's work, his work of atonement. We've seen why it is necessary. We've seen how God supplies for that necessity in providing salvation. But in the next lecture, we will dive into the doctrinal details regarding the Nature of the Atonement.