

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

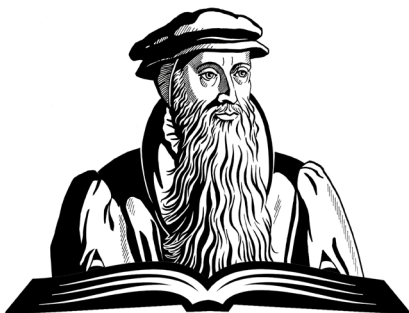
by Dr. Stephen Myers and Robert D. McCurley, ThM

*Module 4:*

### CHRISTOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

*Lecture 8*

### THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT



The John Knox Institute  
of Higher Education

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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## 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 8*

## The Nature of the Atonement

The world thinks of heroes as winners who succeed in triumph. Heroes defeat their foes, break through barriers, and overcome opposition. They always win in the end. So when the world looks upon the story of Jesus Christ, and upon his gruesome death upon the cross of Calvary, they respond with bewilderment, if not disgust. They see his suffering and degradation as weakness and utter defeat. For them, Christ's enemies appear to win. Well, this message is not attractive. It's repulsive to the unbelieving mind. It is the opposite of kingly glory and power. They cannot grasp the idea of God allowing Christ, himself the God-man, the one who is perfect and innocent, to be subjected to all the horrors that his crucifixion involved. Paul acknowledges this in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 23, "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness." The world then and now reacts to the apparent scandal of the cross. But for believing eyes, the opposite is the case. Paul goes on, in verse 24, "But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God."

The cross of Christ, which sits at the center of Christianity, carries a message with a polarizing effect. We can affirm with Paul, in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 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." God gives to the believer the ability to see clearly. Behind the ignoble suffering and death of Christ lies true and ultimate triumph. In his death, Christ is winning the victory over the greatest enemies of the world—over sin and Satan, death and hell—not despite the cross, but through the cross. Here we behold the wisdom and power of God. The cross is Christ's greatest triumph, not his colossal defeat. Well, to better appreciate this reality, we need to understand what Christ's death entailed. That brings us to considering the very Nature of the Atonement, the nature of Christ's atoning sacrifice upon the cross.

This series of lectures in this fourth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the Doctrine of Christ. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the last lecture, we began to consider the work of Christ, specifically the Necessity of the Atonement. In this lecture, we will explore further details on the Nature of the Atonement. And in the next lecture, we will consider the doctrinal details pertaining to the Extent of that Atonement.

So following our normal pattern, we will begin, first of all, by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of the Nature of the Atonement. In Isaiah 53, verse 4 to 7, we read, speaking of Christ, "Surely he hath borne *our* griefs, and carried *our* sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for

*our* transgressions, he was bruised for *our* iniquities: the chastisement of *our* peace was upon him; and with his stripes *we* are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of *us* all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.”

Isaiah 53 provides us with a vivid prophecy regarding Christ’s sacrificial death. It depicts him as one who “is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief,” as we see in verse 3. Well, why is he subjected to so much sorrow? We are told in verse 10, “It pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin.” So then the question comes, “But why? Why does God put him to grief as an offering for sin?” At the heart of this passage, we discover the answer. Notice especially the pronouns used in verses 4 to 7: “He hath borne *our* griefs, and carried *our* sorrows: . . . he was wounded for *our* transgressions, he was bruised for *our* iniquities: the chastisement of *our* peace was upon him; and with his stripes *we* are healed. . . . the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of *us* all.” You see the pronouns—*our*, *we*, *us*. Clearly, he was not dying for himself. Christ was suffering, was bruised, and sacrificed, with sorrow and grief, on behalf of his people. The emphasis falls on substitution. He was dying as a substitute in the place of his people. He was bearing the penalty and punishment for the sins of his people—those he came to save. This is exactly the conclusion Isaiah 53 teaches us. In the very next verse, verse 8, we read, “For the transgression of my people was he stricken.” Christ’s death was a substitutionary atoning sacrifice, in the place of God’s people.

Well, in this lecture we delve into the nature of Christ’s atonement, and so secondly, let’s consider some of the doctrinal details regarding the Nature of the Atonement. *Westminster Confession*, chapter 8, paragraph 5, speaks of the atonement in these words: “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 defined the word “atonement” in the last lecture, where we consider it’s a necessity. Now we will focus more fully on the some of the components that Christ’s substitutionary atonement includes. This also builds upon what we learned about how the Mediator executes the office of a Priest, in a previous lecture. So we’re going to break this down into several points.

First of all, Christ as a Surety. The first concept is that of Christ as our Surety. A surety is one who acts in the place of another. It is one who has become legally liable for the debt or the failure of another, not of himself. So we read in Hebrews 7, verse 22, “By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.” And then verse 25, “Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.” As our Surety, Christ in every way discharged our debt for sin, being bound to all the judgments and punishments for us. Although Christ was perfectly blameless, he stooped to the office of a Surety to do that which should have fallen upon us. Christ is the Head of his body, the church, and as the federal representative of his people, suffered for them. He was supremely able to discharge our debt to the uttermost, as Mediator, having two natures in one person, the manhood knit to the Godhead. And so we see this concept of surety.

The second concept is Christ as the sacrifice. So a dominant theme throughout the Scriptures is the role of the mediator in offering up himself as a sacrifice. Ephesians 5, verse 2 says, “Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling

savour.” As you know, the entire Old Testament sacrificial system pointed forward to this sacrifice of Christ. Again, the central idea in this doctrine is that of substitution. This is what is meant by a vicarious sacrificial atonement. “Vicarious” means the idea of substitution. Christ is our penal substitute. He’s liable to the punishment for our sins. He is the one who stands in the place of his people and atones for their sin. This atoning sacrifice includes both expiation and propitiation. So we need to define these two words, because they’re theologically significant.

First of all, “expiation” refers to blotting out or removing sin, and more specifically, taking away the guilt of sin. Revelation 1, verse 5 says, “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood.” His blood blots out, it cleanses, it removes sin. But then secondly, we have “propitiation,” and this refers to satisfying divine justice and appeasing the wrath of God. We read in Romans 5, verses 8 and 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. That wrath must be removed through Christ’s death, in order to satisfy divine justice. First John 4, verse 10, says, “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” Propitiation is appeasing divine wrath, satisfying divine justice. And so both of these are necessary.

Well, the third concept is reconciliation, which lies near to the meaning of the word “atonement.” We read in Romans 5, verses 10 and 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 refers to the removal of our enmity with God. Christ’s atonement eliminates our alienation from God, and restores friendship and fellowship with God. Well, this is good news indeed! A message proclaimed in the gospel. Listen to Paul’s description, in 2 Corinthians 5, verses 18 to 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.”

The fourth concept is redemption. Ephesians 1, verse 7 says, “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.” Redemption refers to our deliverance, the payment of a price to buy us back to himself. In the idea of ransom, Christ delivers his people from the bondage of sin, sets them free to serve the living God. This concept was prominent in the Old Testament. You think of the exodus from Egypt, sanctifying the firstborn, or the institution of the kinsman redeemer. But it’s also equally clear in the New Testament. The New Testament also teaches that Christ was the ransom. The price paid for our redemption was the bloodshed of our Savior. Christ refers to himself, in Mark 10, verse 45, saying, “To give his life a ransom for many.” You’ll see the same thing in 1 Peter 1.

Specifically, God’s people are redeemed from spiritual bondage. So unlike the physical bondage of being brought out of Egypt at the exodus, we’re talking about spiritual bondage. And that spiritual bondage is fourfold. One, it is the bondage of sin. So it’s guilt, defilement, and power. For example, we read in Titus 2, verse 14, “Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.” Secondly, redemption from this bondage includes the curse of the law. So Galatians 3, verse 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, there is the works of the devil. Again, 1 John 3, verse 8, we read, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.” And then fourthly, we are redeemed from the bondage and power of death. Hebrews 2, verse 14 says, “That through death he might destroy him that had the power of death.” So this concept of redemption is redemption from a fourfold bondage.

But the fifth concept is obedience. Salvation requires obedience to God. This obedience was necessary, as we see in Hebrews 2, verse 10, and chapter 5, verse 9. Theologians distinguish between two aspects: Christ’s active obedience, and Christ’s passive obedience. Both of these describe the whole of Christ’s work. So 2 Corinthians 5, verse 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.” So Christ came to do a work of obedience as the last Adam, and as the chief servant, which many Scriptures teach us. Think about this—sinners must be saved from the guilt of sin. When I say “guilt,” I’m referring to objective guilt, not the guilty feeling, that subjective thing, but being declared guilty objectively as having violated God’s law. So sinners have to be saved from this guilt, and this guilt includes at least two things: being worthy and deserving of punishment, and secondly, an obligation and binding over to that punishment. So we owe to God a double debt. A debt of obedience, and if that fails—which it does—then a debt of punishment. Christ freed us from both of these debts, first, by obeying in our place the will of his Father in everything; and secondly, by suffering in our place what was due to us for our transgressions.

Well, this clarifies the significance of Christ’s active and passive obedience. So first of all, we have his active obedience, that is, Christ’s fulfilling what the law requires, and obtaining a record of perfect righteousness. So God requires perfect obedience to his law. Christ, in his life, obeyed, on behalf of his people, all the precepts of the law. The full requirements and demands of the law and his Father’s will, thereby obtaining a record of perfect righteousness, in our humanity, a record of perfect law-keeping. Christ’s perfect righteousness is then credited, or imputed, to the account of his people, and received by faith, as the ground of their acceptance with God in their justification. So that’s active obedience, Christ’s active obedience, part of his atonement.

Secondly, we have Christ’s passive obedience, that is, his suffering the penalty that is required by the law, so the penalty required for violating the law. God’s law also demands a just punishment for sin. Christ paid the penalty of the law and bears its curse in the place of his people. Philippians 2, verse 8, “And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” Well, this provides for the remission of sins, forgiveness of sins, the expiation of our guilt, and the appeasement of the wrath of the Father. And so obedience is the last concept we’re considering regarding the atonement.

In summary, notice how Christ’s atonement corresponds to all our needs. We spoke about Christ as our sacrifice—that deals with our problem of guilt and God’s wrath for our sin. Secondly, we considered reconciliation, Christ’s atonement securing reconciliation—that deals with our problem of enmity and alienation from God. We spoke about redemption—that addresses our problem of bondage. And then lastly, we discussed obedience as part of the atonement—that addresses our problem of the demands of God’s law, positively and negatively. Well, in each of these points of doctrine, we learn about the nature of Christ’s sacrificial and substitutionary atonement. This opens up the heart of Christ’s work, which is displayed in the proclamation of his glorious gospel of good news to sinners.

Well, thirdly, we turn to the polemical consideration of this doctrine of the Nature of the

Atonement. First of all, every attempt to jettison the substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement attacks the core of the gospel. Some object to it being unfair, or unjust, to punish the innocent in place of the guilty. But Christ was not compelled to suffer a unwilling victim. He freely, voluntarily took the place of his people, and exhibited his infinite, divine love in doing so. It is love that shines forth in substitution.

Secondly, others wish to avoid the notions of guilt, the demands of divine law, liability to punishment, and the requirements of a blood-shedding sacrifice. Well, this ignores the nature of man's need, in light of the nature of God's character. You cannot hold to the Bible and reject these notions, which the Bible clearly teaches. The good news is seen to be good news because of the backdrop of the bad news about man's fallen predicament. As we saw in the last lecture regarding the Necessity of the Atonement, these things which people find unseemly and objectionable are very much necessary in order to save sinners.

Next, you should be aware of a few of the erroneous theories of the atonement that have arisen in history. I'll mention them very briefly. There was the ransom theory, and this idea was that Christ paid a price to Satan, that he bought off Satan, as it were, in exchange for his people. Well this reeks havoc with everything we've learned about the Biblical doctrine of the atonement.

There was the governmental theory of the atonement, which said that God was simply demonstrating his displeasure with sin in the death of Christ, but there was no satisfaction or representation in that atoning work. Well this too, as you can see, attacks the very core of the gospel.

There was the mystical theory of the atonement. This denies the necessity of a blood sacrifice, because sin is simply moral weakness, not something that incurs guilt. The Bible tells us that it incurs guilt.

Lastly, the moral theory said that Christ died as a great example to men, as a martyr of truth. So there's no atonement, no redemption, no sacrifice, no substitution at all. He's like any other martyr that's died in history. And if that's the case, then there's no gospel at all, and every sinner born as a son or daughter of Adam is lost forever.

Well, fourthly, we can now draw some practical applications for ourselves. First of all, think of Paul. Paul was a remarkable man—very gifted. Many would say he had many things in which he could have gloried. But he says himself that he gloried in one thing, and one thing only—the cross of Christ. This sets an example for us. You should make meditation on the cross the constant exercise of your soul. We have only touched on some of the basic truths in this lecture, but there are inexhaustible depths for you to see, and learn, and know.

Secondly, the Christian continues to battle with the presence of sin in their lives. What that means is that we are brought back to Christ's atonement on a daily basis, rehearsing all that he's done to save his sinful people, leading us to plead afresh his blood, and to find shelter in the forgiveness of sin that he has provided. These doctrines are never far from us in our daily lives.

Thirdly, all of these truths should not merely supply information for our heads. They should transform our lives. These doctrines must lead to doxology. They must lead to worshipping and adoring the Redeemer with wonder and with grace. We are led to say, in the words of Revelation 5, verse 12, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing." These doctrines lead us to worship the Lord Jesus Christ, as the God-man, as the Redeemer of his sinful people.

Well, in conclusion, in these last two lectures, we have been considering Christ's work of atonement. In the last lecture, we saw why it is necessary, and how God supplies for that necessity



in providing salvation. In this lecture, we explored the doctrinal details of the Nature of the Atonement. Well, in the next lecture, we'll dive into the Extent of the Atonement, which addresses the question, For whom did Christ die?