

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 7: THE ATONING WORK OF CHRIST

Lesson 20

The Necessity and Nature of the Atonement

Why the Cross Was Not Optional

The Holy God, the Guilty Sinner, and the Only Sufficient Answer

Key Texts: Romans 3:25–26; Romans 5:8; John 10:17–18; Isaiah 53:10; Hebrews 9:22

“God Demonstrates His Own Love Toward Us, in That While We Were Yet Sinners, Christ Died for Us”

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SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

With Lesson 20 we cross another major architectural threshold in this Christology series: the move from the offices of Christ (Units 6) to the atoning work of Christ in its most concentrated and most salvifically decisive form. Unit 7, *The Atoning Work of Christ*, is the longest unit in the series, spanning five lessons (Lessons 20–24), and with good reason: the atonement is the theological center of the entire Christian gospel. Everything that precedes it in this series, the eternal Sonship, the incarnation, the hypostatic union, the impeccable sinless life, the active obedience, the threefold office, exists in the service of this single climactic act: the death of Jesus Christ on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for sin. And everything that follows in this series, the resurrection, the ascension, the intercession, the return, flows from this single event as its vindication, its application, and its consummation. The cross is not one event among many in the life of Jesus; it is the event toward which His entire life moved and from which His entire exalted ministry flows.

This introductory lesson to the atonement unit addresses two foundational questions that must be answered before the specific content of the atonement can be fruitfully engaged: Why was the atonement necessary? (The question of necessity) and What kind of event was it? (The question of nature). These are not academic questions prior to the “real” theological content; they are the questions whose answers determine the meaning and the significance of everything that will be said in Lessons 21–24 about the specific content and mechanics of the atoning work. If the atonement was not necessary, if God could have simply declared sinners forgiven without the death of His Son, or if the cross was merely the most eloquent available means among several equally possible alternatives, then the cross is a demonstration of divine love but not a necessity of divine justice. And if the cross was not a substitutionary sacrifice in which the Son of God bore the penalty that sinners deserved, then the pastoral consolation it offers is fundamentally different from what the New Testament declares.

The lesson examines the necessity of the atonement through the lens of the two major Reformed positions (absolute necessity vs. hypothetical necessity), presents the case for absolute necessity grounded in the essential holiness and justice of God, addresses the voluntary character of the atonement as the supreme expression of divine love, and unpacks the Trinitarian structure of the atoning act. It then addresses the nature of the atonement as a substitutionary sacrifice, Christ bearing the penalty in the place of those He represents, and surveys the major biblical images and metaphors through which the New Testament describes the atoning work. The goal is not merely conceptual clarity but doxological preparation: the person who understands why the cross was necessary and what the cross actually was will worship at the cross with a depth and a joy proportional to the infinite cost at which the love of God was expressed there.

I. THE NECESSITY OF THE ATONEMENT: WHY THE CROSS WAS NOT OPTIONAL

Did God Have to Send His Son to Die? The Two Reformed Positions and Their Implications

A. The Question of Necessity

The question of the necessity of the atonement is one of the most significant in the entire theology of the cross, and it has generated genuine debate within the orthodox Reformed tradition. The question is not whether God was in some external or logical sense obligated to provide an atonement, He was not obligated to provide anything, since the very existence of sinners who could be redeemed is itself an expression of divine mercy rather than divine obligation. The question is whether, given that God purposed to redeem sinners, there was any way of accomplishing that redemption other than through the atoning death of the Son. Could God have simply declared sinners forgiven, without requiring the death of Christ? Could the same redemptive goal have been accomplished by a different means, by a divine decree of amnesty, by a different kind of sacrifice, by a different kind of mediatorial act?

The Reformed tradition has generally answered this question in terms of two positions: the absolute necessity position and the hypothetical necessity position. The absolute necessity position, associated with theologians such as John Owen and Francis Turretin, holds that given the essential holiness and justice of God, it was impossible for God to forgive sin without satisfaction of the divine justice, and therefore the atoning death of the Son was not merely the wisest or most appropriate means of redemption but the only possible means. The hypothetical necessity position, associated with some scholastic Reformed theologians following Duns Scotus, holds that God could theoretically have chosen a different means of redemption but that He wisely chose the death of His Son as the most fitting and the most glorifying means available. Both positions affirm the full necessity of the cross given God's actual choice to redeem; they differ on whether the choice to redeem through substitutionary atonement was itself necessary or contingent.

B. The Case for Absolute Necessity

The case for the absolute necessity of the atonement rests on the character of God as revealed in Scripture. The God of Scripture is not merely benevolent in a way that could absorb or overlook sin without remainder; He is holy and just in a way that requires sin to be addressed, judged, and punished. Romans 3:25–26 is the crucial text: God “displayed publicly” Christ “as a propitiation in His blood” specifically “for the demonstration of His righteousness” (ἐνδείξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ, *endeixin tēs dikaiosynēs autou*), “because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed” and “for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (NASB 1995). The specific purpose of the propitiation is the demonstration of the divine justice, not merely the expression of

the divine love, but the vindication of the divine righteousness which might have appeared to be compromised by the passing over of previously committed sins.

Owen's argument, developed in his magisterial *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, is that the justice of God is not a contingent divine attribute, not a disposition that God might have chosen to exercise or not to exercise with equal freedom, but an essential divine perfection that is as necessary to God's being as His holiness or His love. A God who could simply overlook sin by decree without satisfaction of justice would not be the God of Scripture, whose wrath against sin is real, righteous, and not arbitrarily removable. The holiness and justice of God are not external constraints on the divine will; they are the divine will itself in its essential character. And if the divine justice requires that sin be punished, then there is no path from the guilt of sin to the forgiveness of sin that bypasses the satisfaction of justice. The cross was not optional.

"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." | "So that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

ROMANS 5:8; 3:26, NASB 1995

II. THE VOLUNTARY CHARACTER OF THE ATONEMENT: THE LOVE THAT CHOSE THE CROSS

No One Has Taken It Away from Me, I Lay It Down on My Own Initiative

A. The Freedom of the Son in the Atoning Act

The necessity of the atonement must be held in careful tension with the equally biblical affirmation of its voluntary character. The cross was necessary in the sense that the divine justice required satisfaction; but it was voluntary in the sense that the Son was not coerced, compelled, or externally obligated to provide that satisfaction. He chose it, freely, deliberately, and from the eternal depths of His love for the Father and for those the Father gave Him. John 10:17–18 records His own explicit declaration: "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (NASB 1995). The language is emphatic and repeated: "I lay it down" (twice), "no one has taken it away from Me," "I have authority." The death of Jesus was not an execution imposed on Him by external powers; it was a voluntary self-offering made by the one who had authority both to lay His life down and to take it up again.

The voluntary character of the atonement is inseparable from its character as the supreme expression of divine love. Romans 5:8 declares: "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (NASB 1995). The cross is the demonstration (*συνίστησιν*,

synistēsín) of the love of God, not the conclusion of a logical argument about what God must have felt, but the visible, historical, event-based display of what God actually did. The love displayed is “His own love” (ἐαυτοῦ ἀγάπην, *heautou agapēn*), the love that is essential to the divine character, not a condescension reluctantly offered. And the timing of the display, “while we were yet sinners”, makes the love all the more staggering: not when we had become worthy of it, not when we had demonstrated our potential, but in the precise condition of our worst enmity toward God and our deepest need.

B. The Isaiah 53:10 Perspective: The Father’s Initiative

The voluntary character of the atonement is not only the Son’s voluntary self-offering but the Father’s voluntary initiative in ordaining and sending. Isaiah 53:10 provides the most searching Old Testament statement of the divine initiative in the suffering of the Servant: “But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand” (NASB 1995). The phrase “the Lord was pleased to crush Him” (יהוה חפץ דכאו, *YHWH hāpēs dakkā’ō*) has generated extensive theological discussion: in what sense was the Lord “pleased” to crush the Servant? The pleasure is not the pleasure of sadism but the pleasure of the divine will that achieves its ultimate redemptive purpose through the suffering of the Servant. The Father wills the suffering of the Son not because He delights in suffering per se but because He delights in the redemption that the suffering accomplishes.

The Trinitarian structure of the atonement, fully unpacked, discloses a profound mystery of divine love: the Father sends the Son, the Son voluntarily goes, and the Spirit sustains and empowers the offering (Hebrews 9:14: “who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God”, NASB 1995). The three Persons of the Trinity are not in conflict at the cross, the Father demanding what the Son reluctantly concedes; rather, the three Persons act in perfect, willing, loving concert to accomplish the redemption that all three will. The love displayed at the cross is not merely the love of the Son who dies but the love of the Father who gives (“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,” John 3:16, NASB 1995) and the love of the Spirit who applies the benefits of the sacrifice to those for whom it was offered.

III. THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT: SUBSTITUTION AS THE HEART OF THE CROSS

Why Only a Substitute Could Accomplish What Sinners Need

A. The Biblical Logic of Substitution

The nature of the atonement, what kind of event the cross was, is the most theologically contested dimension of the doctrine, and it is the dimension that most directly determines the pastoral power

and the soteriological adequacy of the gospel proclaimed. The New Testament's own vocabulary for the cross is irreducibly substitutionary: Christ died "for" (ὄπερ, hyper, or περί, peri) sinners, "in our place," "as our representative and substitute." The prepositions carry the substitutionary weight: in Romans 5:6–8, "Christ died for (ὕπερ, hyper) the ungodly" and "Christ died for us"; in 1 Corinthians 15:3, "Christ died for (ὕπερ, hyper) our sins according to the Scriptures"; in Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for (ὕπερ, hyper) us"; and in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf (ὕπερ, hyper)." The consistent use of hyper in the context of the atoning death carries the sense of substitution: Christ takes the place of those He represents, bearing what they owed so that they need not bear it.

The substitutionary logic is not merely a deduction from the prepositions; it is embedded in the entire structure of the biblical atonement theology. Hebrews 9:22 states the foundational principle: "And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (NASB 1995). The principle is not arbitrary; it reflects the divine logic of life for life: the life of the innocent (the animal) is given in place of the life of the guilty (the sinner), and the shedding of the substitutionary blood is the enacted declaration that the penalty has been paid by proxy. Isaiah 53 develops this substitutionary logic with the most concentrated theological vocabulary in the Old Testament: "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried... He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (Isaiah 53:4–6, NASB 1995). The pronouns are explicit: our griefs, our sorrows, our transgressions, our iniquities, all borne by the Servant in our place.

B. The Necessity of Substitution

Why was substitution necessary? Why could God not simply forgive sin without requiring a substitute to bear its penalty? The answer returns to the character of God established in Section I: the divine justice is essential to the divine nature and cannot simply be set aside by divine decree. Sin has produced an objective debt, a legal and moral obligation to bear the penalty that the law prescribes. That debt cannot be cancelled by divine fiat without compromising the justice that is essential to the divine character. But the sinner who owes the debt cannot pay it, the debt exceeds the finite sinner's capacity to discharge it, and no finite act of penance, moral achievement, or religious performance can satisfy the infinite demands of justice against an infinite offense against the infinitely holy God.

The substitute must therefore be both able to bear the penalty (capable of suffering and dying, which requires genuine humanity) and worthy to bear it for infinite effect (of infinite worth, which requires genuine deity). Only the one who is truly God and truly man, the Chalcedonian Christ, the one whose Person we have spent the first fifteen lessons of this series establishing, meets both requirements simultaneously. The substitutionary atonement requires the hypostatic union: a merely human

substitute would bear a finite penalty for a finite number of sins; a merely divine substitute could not genuinely suffer and die. Only the God-man, who is of infinite worth in His divine nature and capable of genuine suffering and death in His human nature, can provide the once-for-all, infinitely sufficient substitutionary atonement that the gospel declares. The doctrine of the atonement is not separable from the doctrine of the Person: who Christ is (Unit 4) is the precise ground of what He can do (Unit 7).

IV. THE TRINITARIAN NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT

The Father Sends, the Son Dies, the Spirit Applies, The Cross Is a Work of the Whole Trinity

A. The Father's Initiative: The God Who Gives

The Trinitarian structure of the atonement is one of the most theologically rich and the most personally consoling dimensions of the cross. The atonement is not the work of the Son alone, as if the Father were a reluctant divine judge finally persuaded to accept the Son's propitiatory offering; nor is it the work of the Father alone, as if the Son were a passive victim of the divine wrath. It is the work of the whole Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit, each acting in the way appropriate to His person and His role in the divine economy, all three willing together the redemption that the atoning death accomplishes.

The Father's role in the atonement is the role of the one who gives and sends. John 3:16 declares: "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (NASB 1995). The Father gives the Son, an act of infinite cost, because the one given is the Father's only begotten, the object of the eternal Trinitarian love. Romans 8:32 extends the point with stunning brevity: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" (NASB 1995). The "did not spare" (οὐκ ἐφείσατο, *ouk epheisato*) echoes the LXX of Genesis 22:16, where God declares that Abraham "did not spare his son, his only son." The Father who did not spare His own Son is the Father who, in the most agonizing possible act of divine love, delivers the Son "for us all", not reluctantly, but willingly and lovingly, in the full knowledge of what the not-sparing would cost.

B. The Son's Obedience: The God Who Goes

The Son's role in the atonement is the role of the one who goes and offers. Philippians 2:5–8 describes the movement of the Son's voluntary self-giving: from the form of God, through the assumption of the form of a servant, through genuine human birth and growth, to the cross: "He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8, NASB 1995). The voluntary, progressive, culminating character of the Son's self-giving, each step of the kenotic descent freely chosen, is the Philippians account of what John 10:17–18 declares more directly: "I lay it down on My own initiative." The obedience unto death is the supreme expression of the Son's active

obedience (already examined in Lesson 15): the entire life of obedient submission to the Father's will culminates in the ultimate act of obedient submission at the cross.

Hebrews 10:5–7 applies Psalm 40:6–8 to the Son's self-offering with revelatory precision: "A body You have prepared for Me; in whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come (in the scroll of the book it is written of Me) to do Your will, O God'" (NASB 1995). The incarnation itself, the preparation of a body, is understood as the preparation for the sacrifice; and the entire incarnate life is understood as the Son's coming to do the Father's will, which includes and culminates in the sacrificial death. The "Behold, I have come" is the voluntary entrance of the Son into the incarnation with the cross already in view; the "to do Your will" is the willingness that makes the cross not an imposition but an offering.

C. The Spirit's Role: The God Who Sustains and Applies

Hebrews 9:14 provides the decisive text for understanding the Spirit's role in the atonement: "who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God" (NASB 1995). The Spirit is not absent from the cross; He is the "eternal Spirit" through whom the Son offers Himself, the divine power that sustains the incarnate Son in His human nature through the full weight of the atoning suffering, enabling the human nature to bear what it bears and the offering to be rendered without blemish. The Spirit who descended on Jesus at His baptism, who led Him into the wilderness, who anointed Him for the ministry, sustains Him through the darkness of Gethsemane and Golgotha. And after the cross, the Spirit's role becomes the application of the atoning work: He convicts of sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8), He regenerates those for whom the atonement was made, He applies the blood of Christ to the conscience (Hebrews 9:14), and He seals the redeemed as the guarantee of the inheritance (Ephesians 1:13–14). The cross is from beginning to end a Trinitarian act.

V. THE BIBLICAL IMAGES OF THE ATONEMENT: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL REALITY

No Single Metaphor Exhausts the Infinite Significance of What Happened at the Cross

A. The Richness of the New Testament's Atonement Vocabulary

One of the most theologically instructive features of the New Testament's presentation of the atonement is the extraordinary richness and diversity of the metaphors and images through which it describes what happened at the cross. The cross is not a simple event whose meaning can be captured in a single formulation; it is an event of such infinite theological depth and such comprehensive salvific scope that no single image or concept can exhaust its meaning. The New Testament draws on at least five major categories of images to describe what the cross accomplished, each illuminating a

different dimension of the atoning work and each addressing a different dimension of the human problem.

The sacrificial image draws on the Old Testament sacrificial system: Christ is “our Passover” (1 Corinthians 5:7), “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), the one who “gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Ephesians 5:2, NASB 1995). The sacrificial image addresses the problem of sin’s defilement and the need for purification: the blood of the sacrifice cleanses what sin has defiled. The penal substitution image draws on the law court: Christ “who bore our sins in His body on the cross” (1 Peter 2:24), who became “a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13), who was “made sin on our behalf” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The penal substitution image addresses the problem of guilt and the need for the penalty to be borne by a substitute. The redemption image draws on the slave market: Christ gave His life “a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45), “purchased for God with His blood” people from every nation (Revelation 5:9). The redemption image addresses the problem of bondage and the need for purchase and liberation.

B. Reconciliation and Christus Victor

The reconciliation image draws on the language of restored personal relationship: God was “in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19), and Christ is “our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall” (Ephesians 2:14, NASB 1995). The reconciliation image addresses the problem of enmity and separation, the broken relationship between God and humanity that sin has produced, and the need for the restoration of fellowship. The Christus Victor image draws on the language of cosmic battle: Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, triumphing over them” through the cross (Colossians 2:15, NASB 1995); “Through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14, NASB 1995). The Christus Victor image addresses the problem of bondage to spiritual powers and the need for liberation through the defeat of the adversary.

The question that has generated the most significant theological controversy in the twentieth century is whether all five images are equally central and equally necessary to an adequate account of the atonement, or whether one of them, penal substitution, is the organizing center that gives the others their meaning. Gustaf Aulén’s *Christus Victor* (1931) argued that the Christus Victor image was the dominant model of the patristic church and that penal substitution was a late medieval imposition. The Reformed tradition’s response, developed by J.I. Packer, Leon Morris, John Stott, and others, has been that while all five images are biblically attested and mutually enriching, penal substitution occupies the organizing center: it is the foundation on which the other images rest and from which they derive their salvific power. The sacrifice is sufficient because the Substitute bore the penalty; the redemption is free because the Substitute paid the price; the reconciliation is genuine because the Substitute absorbed the enmity; the Christus Victor is permanent because the Substitute’s death defeated the powers that held sinners captive. Penal substitution is not one atonement image among equals; it is the heart of the heart.

VI. DOXOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: THE LOVE OF GOD DISPLAYED

The question with which this lesson began, Why was the cross necessary?, now receives its fullest answer, and the answer is profoundly doxological. The cross was necessary because the God of Scripture is holy and just in a way that requires sin to be punished; because sin has produced an objective guilt-debt that no finite sinner can discharge; and because the only path from guilt to forgiveness that does not compromise the divine justice is the path through a substitute who can bear the penalty with infinite sufficiency. These are the reasons why the cross was necessary. But the reasons for its necessity are themselves expressions of the divine love, because the God who required the propitiation of divine justice also provided the propitiation in His own Son. “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10, NASB 1995). The necessity of the atonement and the love that provided it are not in tension; they are two dimensions of the same divine reality. The cross is necessary because God is just; the cross is provided because God is love; and the cross is sufficient because God is the one who bore it.

John Stott, in *The Cross of Christ*, puts the point with characteristic clarity and pastoral warmth: “In giving his Son, God was not giving someone other than himself. He was giving himself. The self-substitution of God lies at the heart of the cross.” This is the theological ground of the doxological response that the cross demands: it is not merely a divine solution to a human problem, not merely a legal transaction that settles the debt of sin, not merely a demonstration of moral principle. It is the self-substitution of the infinitely holy, infinitely loving God, who rather than condemning the creatures He had made chose to bear in His own Person the condemnation they deserved. The Father who did not spare His own Son, the Son who laid down His life on His own initiative, the Spirit who sustained the offering and applies its benefits, the whole Trinity at the cross, for us.

As we move into Lessons 21–24, which will examine the specific content of the penal substitutionary atonement, the extent of the atonement, the cry of dereliction, and the seven last words from the cross, let the governing theological conviction be this: the cross was not optional, not accidental, not peripheral, and not merely symbolic. It was the most necessary and the most costly event in the history of the universe, accomplished by the most willing and the most loving act of self-giving that the eternal God could perform. Every dimension of the atonement theology that follows in this unit rests on this foundation; and every act of Christian worship rests on the cross that these lessons are working to understand. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and who has made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (Revelation 1:5–6, NASB 1995).

Key Texts: *Romans 3:25–26; Romans 5:6–8; John 10:17–18; Isaiah 53:4–10; Hebrews 9:14, 22; John 3:16; Philippians 2:5–8; Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:19–21; 1 John 4:10; Hebrews 10:5–7*

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Atonement	The comprehensive theological term for the work of Christ by which sinners are reconciled to the holy God through the bearing of the penalty for sin by a divinely appointed substitute. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew <i>kapār</i> (כפר, 'to cover,' 'to make atonement') describes the sacrificial covering of sin through the offering of blood. In the New Testament, the full dimension of the atonement is expressed through multiple images: sacrifice, penal substitution, redemption, reconciliation, and Christus Victor. The atonement is not a human achievement but a divine provision: God both requires the satisfaction of justice and provides it in His own Son. The word 'at-one-ment', the making of 'at-one' of those who were alienated, captures its relational dimension.
Absolute Necessity	The theological position that the atoning death of Christ was the only possible means of human redemption given the essential holiness and justice of God, rather than merely the wisest or most fitting among several possible alternatives. Associated with John Owen and Francis Turretin in the Reformed tradition. The argument: divine justice is an essential divine attribute (not a contingent disposition), sin produces a genuine debt to divine justice that cannot be cancelled by decree, and therefore no path exists from guilt to forgiveness that bypasses the satisfaction of justice. Distinguished from hypothetical necessity (God could theoretically have redeemed by other means but chose the cross as the most fitting).
Hypothetical Necessity	The theological position that God could theoretically have chosen a different means of redemption but that He wisely and fittingly chose the death of His Son as the most appropriate and most glorifying means. Associated with some scholastic theologians following Duns Scotus. Affirms the full necessity of the cross given God's actual choice to redeem, while holding that the choice itself was not logically necessary but was a contingent expression of the divine wisdom and will. Both absolute and hypothetical necessity positions affirm the reality and the sufficiency of the atonement; they differ on the modal status of the cross as the divine means of redemption.
Penal Substitution	The atonement model that identifies Christ's death as the bearing of the penal consequences of sin in the place of those He represents, Christ taking the punishment that sinners deserved so that sinners need not bear it. Grounded in Isaiah 53 ('He was pierced through for our transgressions'), 2 Corinthians 5:21 ('made Him who knew no sin to be sin'), Galatians 3:13 ('having become a curse for us'), and 1 Peter 2:24 ('He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross'). Considered by the Reformed tradition to be the organizing center of the atonement that gives the other images their salvific power: the sacrifice is

Term	Definition
	sufficient, the redemption is free, and the reconciliation is genuine because the Substitute bore the penalty.
Christus Victor	The atonement model that emphasizes Christ's death and resurrection as the decisive defeat of the powers of sin, death, and the devil that held humanity captive. Grounded in Colossians 2:15 ('disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, triumphing over them through the cross'), Hebrews 2:14 ('through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death'), and 1 John 3:8 ('the Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil'). Popularized by Gustaf Aulén's <i>Christus Victor</i> (1931) as the dominant patristic atonement model. Not an alternative to penal substitution but a complementary image: the defeat of the powers is accomplished through and by means of the substitutionary bearing of the penalty.
Hyper / For Us	The Greek preposition <i>hyper</i> (ὑπέρ), meaning 'on behalf of' or 'in the place of,' used throughout the New Testament to describe the substitutionary character of Christ's death. Romans 5:6–8 ('Christ died for the ungodly'), 1 Corinthians 15:3 ('Christ died for our sins'), Galatians 3:13 ('having become a curse for us'), and 2 Corinthians 5:21 ('on our behalf') all use <i>hyper</i> to establish the representative and substitutionary character of the atoning death. The consistent use of <i>hyper</i> in the New Testament's atonement texts is one of the primary exegetical grounds for the penal substitutionary model.
Trinitarian Atonement	The theological affirmation that the atonement is not the work of the Son alone but of the whole Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit each acting in the way appropriate to His person and role in the divine economy. The Father sends and does not spare (John 3:16; Romans 8:32; Isaiah 53:10); the Son goes and offers Himself voluntarily (John 10:17–18; Philippians 2:5–8; Hebrews 10:5–7); the Spirit sustains the offering and applies its benefits (Hebrews 9:14; John 16:8; Ephesians 1:13–14). The Trinitarian structure of the atonement guards against the error of treating the cross as the Father's wrath against the Son (as if the Persons were in conflict) and establishes it as the willing, loving, concerted act of the triune God.
Self-Substitution of God	John Stott's phrase from <i>The Cross of Christ</i> for the theological reality at the heart of the atonement: in giving His Son, God was not giving someone other than Himself; He was giving Himself. The self-substitution captures the Trinitarian unity of the divine act at the cross: the Father who requires the propitiation is the same God as the Son who provides it. This formulation addresses the objection that penal substitution involves the Father punishing an innocent third party (the Son); on the self-substitution model, God both requires and bears the penalty, satisfying His own justice through His own Person rather than through an external third party. The self-substitution is the

Term	Definition
	<p>deepest expression of the divine love: God takes the consequences of human sin upon Himself.</p>
<p>Atonement Models</p>	<p>The various theological frameworks through which the New Testament’s account of the cross is organized and systematized: (1) Sacrifice (cleansing the defiled); (2) Penal Substitution (bearing the penalty for the guilty); (3) Redemption (purchasing the enslaved); (4) Reconciliation (restoring the estranged); (5) Christus Victor (defeating the powers that hold the captive). No single model exhausts the infinite theological significance of the cross; together they illuminate different dimensions of the atoning work and address different dimensions of the human problem. The Reformed tradition holds that penal substitution is the organizing center that gives the other models their salvific grounding.</p>
<p>Kipper / Kapār</p>	<p>Hebrew: ‘to cover,’ ‘to make atonement’ (כָּפַר). The primary Old Testament word for the making of atonement through sacrifice, used extensively in Leviticus for the atoning function of the blood sacrifice (‘the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls’, Leviticus 17:11, NASB 1995). The kapār of the Old Testament sacrificial system is the typological background against which the New Testament’s atonement vocabulary is set: the blood that covers, that turns aside the divine judgment, that makes the defiled clean, all of which finds its ultimate fulfillment in the blood of Christ, the one sacrifice that accomplishes permanently what the Levitical sacrifices signified.</p>

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the cross was necessary, not in the sense that God was externally constrained by some force outside Himself, but in the sense that the divine justice that requires sin to be punished is essential to the divine nature and cannot be set aside by divine decree. The Christian gospel is not the announcement of a divine amnesty in which God simply decides to overlook sin without remainder; it is the announcement of a divine atonement in which God provides in His own Son the satisfaction of the justice that He requires. The congregation that understands the necessity of the atonement will understand the cross not as a regrettable event that could have been avoided but as the necessary, costly, divinely ordained provision without which there was and is no salvation. And they will worship at the cross with an awe proportional to the infinite cost at which the love of God was expressed there.

We must also believe that penal substitution is not one atonement model among equals but the organizing center of the New Testament's account of the cross. This does not mean that the other images (sacrifice, redemption, reconciliation, Christus Victor) are unimportant or marginal; it means that they are most fully understood when they are grounded in the substitutionary reality that gives them their salvific power. The sacrifice is sufficient because the Substitute bore the penalty; the redemption is effective because the Substitute paid the price; the reconciliation is genuine because the Substitute absorbed the enmity. Penal substitution is not a culturally conditioned metaphor that needs to be demythologized for a modern audience; it is the theological grammar of the gospel, and the congregation that does not understand it does not fully understand what Christ accomplished for them at the cross.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the necessity of the atonement deepen the worship you bring to the cross. If the cross was necessary, if there was no other way, then the Father who gave His Son and the Son who laid down His life were expressing a love that was willing to pay the maximum possible cost rather than permit the alternative. The alternative was not the simple continuation of the status quo; it was the eternal condemnation of every person the Father had purposed to redeem. The love that chose the cross rather than allow that condemnation is a love proportional to the infinite cost of the choice. Let the theology of necessity press you to a worship of the cross that is proportional to its infinite theological weight.

Desire to preach and teach the cross in a way that produces not merely intellectual assent but the existential, personal, prostrating recognition that this event was accomplished for you specifically, in your place, bearing your guilt, satisfying the justice that your sin deserved. The doctrines of this lesson are not primarily doctrines to be argued; they are realities to be inhabited, worshipped, and proclaimed. The pastor who inhabits the theology of the cross with his whole person, who feels the weight of what the necessity means and the wonder of what the voluntariness means, will preach the cross in a way that communicates not merely the content of the atonement but the person of the one who accomplished it.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Preach the necessity of the atonement as the theological ground of its adequacy. The congregation that understands why the cross was necessary will understand why it is sufficient: the same divine justice that made it necessary makes it adequate when satisfied. A sermon that establishes the necessity from Romans 3:25–26 (the demonstration of the divine righteousness) before declaring the adequacy from Romans 5:8 (God demonstrates His love) will give the congregation a far deeper understanding of the cross than the sermon that declares the adequacy without establishing the necessity.

- Engage the objection that penal substitution is immoral or primitive directly and apologetically. In contemporary theological discourse, the most persistent objection to penal substitution is that it involves an innocent party being punished for the guilt of others, a form of divine child abuse, in the language of some critics. Know the response: (1) the Trinitarian unity of the divine act means that in giving His Son, God gave Himself, so that the distinction between punisher and punished is internal to the divine life, not external; (2) the Son went voluntarily, not under compulsion; (3) the ‘innocent party’ language is misleading because Christ took on the guilt of those He represented through the imputation of their sin to Him. Engage this objection with theological precision, intellectual charity, and pastoral patience.
- Use all five atonement images in your preaching rather than confining yourself to one. The richness of the New Testament’s atonement vocabulary is not a sign of theological confusion but of theological depth. Congregations shaped exclusively by the sacrifice image may not fully appreciate the victory dimension; congregations shaped exclusively by the Christus Victor image may not understand the guilt-and-penalty dimension that only penal substitution addresses. Preaching all five images, with penal substitution as the organizing center, will give the congregation the most comprehensive and most personally applicable understanding of the cross available.
- Read John Stott’s *The Cross of Christ* as the most accessible and the most pastorally oriented comprehensive treatment of the atonement available in the Reformed tradition. Stott engages the historical, exegetical, theological, and pastoral dimensions of the cross with characteristic clarity, warmth, and precision. His central argument, that the self-substitution of God is the heart of the atonement, is both theologically rigorous and personally compelling. Every pastor who has worked through *The Cross of Christ* will preach the cross differently and better.
- Prepare the congregation for the more detailed treatment of the atonement that Lessons 21–24 will provide. This lesson has established the foundations, necessity, voluntariness, substitution, Trinitarian structure, the multiplicity of images. The subsequent lessons will examine penal substitution in detail (Lesson 21), the extent of the atonement (Lesson 22), the cry of dereliction (Lesson 23), and the seven last words from the cross (Lesson 24). A brief preview of this arc, perhaps as the concluding pastoral application, will help the congregation approach the subsequent lessons with the expectation and the anticipation that this most important of theological subjects deserves.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. How would you describe your congregation's current understanding of the cross? If you asked them why Christ had to die, why the atonement was necessary, what answers do you think they would give? Would they be able to articulate the relationship between the divine justice and the divine love in the cross? Would they understand what is meant by penal substitution? What does the current state of your congregation's understanding of the cross tell you about what the subsequent lessons of this unit most need to address?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

2. Read Romans 3:21–26. Identify the specific purpose for which the propitiation was displayed publicly according to verses 25–26. Why does Paul say the propitiation was needed 'for the demonstration of His righteousness'? What problem had been created by the 'passing over of sins previously committed'? How does verse 26 ('so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus') describe the achievement of the cross in terms of both the divine justice (He is just) and the free offer of salvation (the justifier)?

3. Read John 10:14–18. How many times does Jesus use the phrase 'I lay down My life' or its equivalent in this passage? What specifically does He claim about the authority He possesses regarding His death? What is the relationship between His voluntary self-giving and the Father's commandment in verse 18? How does this passage refute the claim that the atonement involved an innocent third party being coerced by the Father to bear a punishment He did not choose?

4. Read Isaiah 53:4–12. Identify every instance in this passage in which the Servant's suffering is explicitly described as borne in the place of or on behalf of others (notice the pronouns: our griefs, our sorrows, our transgressions, our iniquities). What is the relationship between the Servant's suffering and the healing or peace of those He represents? How does verse 10 ('the Lord was pleased to crush Him') describe the Father's role in the atonement, and how should 'pleased' be understood, what kind of pleasure is being described?

5. Read Hebrews 9:11–14 and 9:22. What does verse 22 ('without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness') establish about the divine logic underlying the requirement of blood sacrifice? How does the comparison in verses 13–14 (the blood of animals vs. the blood of Christ) illuminate the nature and sufficiency of the atonement? What specific role does the Holy Spirit play in verse 14 ('who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish'), and why is the inclusion of the Spirit theologically significant?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

6. The lesson presents two Reformed positions on the necessity of the atonement: absolute necessity (God could not have redeemed by any other means given His essential justice) and hypothetical necessity (God could theoretically have chosen another means but wisely chose the cross). Which

position do you find more theologically compelling, and why? What are the pastoral implications of each position for the way the congregation understands the cross? Does the distinction between the two positions make a practical difference in preaching, or is it primarily an academic question?

7. The lesson argues that penal substitution is the organizing center of the atonement, giving the other images their salvific grounding. Evaluate this claim. How specifically does penal substitution serve as the ground of: (a) the sacrificial image (the sacrifice is sufficient because...); (b) the redemption image (the ransom is effective because...); (c) the reconciliation image (the peace is genuine because...); and (d) the Christus Victor image (the powers are defeated because...)? Is the Reformed case for penal substitution's centrality convincing? What would be lost if penal substitution were relegated to one model among equals?

8. The lesson identifies the Trinitarian structure of the atonement, the Father sends and does not spare, the Son goes and offers, the Spirit sustains and applies. How does the Trinitarian structure of the atonement respond to the objection that penal substitution involves 'divine child abuse', an innocent third party being punished by the Father? How does the phrase 'self-substitution of God' (John Stott) address this objection? Is the response adequate, or are there remaining difficulties?

9. The lesson presents five major atonement images: sacrifice, penal substitution, redemption, reconciliation, and Christus Victor. Which of these five images is most prominent in your current preaching practice, and which is least prominent? For the least prominent image, identify: (a) the specific biblical texts that ground it; (b) the specific dimension of the human problem it addresses; and (c) the specific pastoral need in your congregation for which it is most directly relevant. What would you need to do in your preaching to give this neglected image its appropriate place?

10. The lesson argues that the necessity of the atonement and the love that provided it are not in tension but are two dimensions of the same divine reality: the cross is necessary because God is just and loving at the same time. How does Romans 3:26 ('that He would be just and the justifier') express this dual reality in a single formulation? How does this formulation protect the gospel from two opposite distortions: the distortion that makes God so just that His forgiveness of sinners seems inexplicable, and the distortion that makes God so loving that His justice seems irrelevant?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

11. The lesson recommends preaching the necessity of the atonement as the theological ground of its adequacy. Think of a specific member of your congregation who struggles with assurance of salvation, who wonders whether the cross is really sufficient for their particular sins or their particular degree of guilt. How would the doctrine of the necessity of the atonement specifically address their struggle? What would you say that connects the necessity (the divine justice required it) to the adequacy (the divine justice has been fully satisfied by the one who bore the penalty)?

- 12.** The lesson recommends engaging the objection that penal substitution is immoral ('divine child abuse') directly and apologetically. In your ministry context, where are you most likely to encounter this objection: in conversations with theologically informed critics, in the questions of new or doubting believers, or in the implicit assumptions of the broader culture? Draft a brief (three to four paragraph) response to the objection that is theologically precise, intellectually honest, and pastorally warm. What would you say, and what would you be most careful not to say?
- 13.** The lesson opens Unit 7 on the Atoning Work of Christ, which will span five lessons (20–24). Now that you have read the introductory lesson, what are the three questions about the atonement that you are most hoping the subsequent lessons will answer? How do those questions relate to your specific preaching needs, your congregation's specific theological questions, or the specific pastoral situations you most regularly encounter in ministry?
- 14.** The lesson closes with the doxological observation that the cross was 'the most necessary and the most costly event in the history of the universe, accomplished by the most willing and the most loving act of self-giving that the eternal God could perform.' In what ways does your current preaching of the cross communicate both the necessity and the willingness? What would change in your preaching of the cross if you consistently established the necessity before declaring the love, so that the love is received against the backdrop of its infinite cost?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson's prayer time with a reading of Romans 3:21–26, Paul's compressed account of the necessity and the nature of the atonement in its most theologically precise New Testament formulation. Read it slowly, attending to the specific language: "demonstration of His righteousness" (the necessity of the display of divine justice), "propitiation in His blood through faith" (the substitutionary character of the atoning act), "just and the justifier" (the resolution of the apparent tension between divine justice and divine forgiveness). Then read 1 John 4:9–10, the most compressed statement of the love that motivated the cross: "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Let the group notice that these two texts together, the justice of Romans 3 and the love of 1 John 4, are not in tension but are two sides of the same divine reality. The cross is the place where the justice and the love of God meet, and the worship that the cross demands is the worship of those who have been recipients of both.

Spend time in adoration of the triune God at the cross, specifically in the Trinitarian structure developed in this lesson. Adore the Father who 'did not spare His own Son but delivered Him over for us all', who loved us enough to give what was most costly to Him, and who required of Himself in the Son what He could not accept from any other source. Adore the Son who 'laid down His life on His own initiative' and who humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross, the voluntary, progressive, culminating self-giving of the one who had authority both to lay His life

down and to take it up again. Adore the Spirit who sustained the incarnate Son through the full weight of the atoning suffering and who now applies the benefits of the cross to every believer in every generation of the church.

Pray through the specific pastoral needs of your congregation in the light of the atonement theology this lesson has established. Bring before the Father those in your congregation who are carrying the weight of guilt for sins they cannot shake, and remind yourself, and them, that the divine justice has been fully satisfied in the Son, and that the propitiation is sufficient for every sin that every person who is in Christ has committed or will commit. Bring before the Son those who are struggling to believe that the cross was 'for me' rather than for others, and bring them the hyper, the 'for us,' the 'while we were yet sinners' of Romans 5:8. Bring before the Spirit those who need the illuminating, applying, sealing work of the Spirit to make the theological reality of the cross a personally experienced assurance of forgiveness and acceptance.

Close with Romans 5:8 and 3:26 spoken together as the corporate confession of a community that has received the double gift of the cross, the demonstration of both the divine justice and the divine love:

"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us... that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

ROMANS 5:8; 3:26, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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