

Soteriology

The Necessity of the Atonement

Lesson Overview: Quick Thoughts, In What Way Was the Atonement Necessary, The Bible's Presentation of The Necessity of The Atonement.

Introduction:

Why did Jesus have to die? If God is so powerful, then why didn't He just save us another way? Why did God pour out His wrath on His only and beloved Son? These are questions that no doubt have crossed the minds of most believers. At first glance, it may seem as though Jesus' death wasn't strictly necessary. But what does Scripture really say? Let's examine historical positions and what the Scripture teaches about these truths.

I. Quick Thoughts.

A. What does atonement mean?

1. We will be spending a large part of the next few weeks discussing the atonement. It is vital for our understanding that we have a clear definition of the atonement.
2. "The term is derived from Anglo-Saxon words meaning 'making at one,' hence 'at-one-ment.' It presupposes a separation or alienation that needs to be overcome if human beings are to know God and have fellowship with him."¹
3. Its use in theology is to denote the work of Christ in dealing with the problem posed by the sin of man, and in bringing sinners into right relation with God.²
4. "The word 'atonement' occurs many times in the OT but only once in the NT (Rom 5:11). Modern translations generally, and more correctly, render the word 'reconciliation.' The idea of atonement is ever-present in the NT, however, and is one of the fundamental concepts of Scripture."³
5. At its most basic level, to atone means to satisfy the need.⁴

B. Does God really *need* to save anyone?

1. When we speak of the necessity of the atonement, it is easy to fall into the thought process that God needed to find some way to save us.
2. Does God have to show grace? Would it be unrighteous of God to condemn all sinners to eternal damnation?
3. "It is important to realize that it was not necessary for God to save any people at all."⁵
 - **2 Peter 2:4 (ESV)** — *For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment;*

¹ Robert W. Lyon and Peter Toon, "Atonement," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 231.

² L. L. Morris, "Atonement," in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood et al. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 102.

³ Robert W. Lyon and Peter Toon, "Atonement," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 231.

⁴ Pastor Alex Martin in a casual conversation on 9-26-2025.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 706.

- Is God unrighteous to never offer a chance of redemption for the angels who sinned against him?

4. “God could have chosen with perfect justice to have left us in our sins awaiting judgment: he could have chosen to save no one, just as he did with the sinful angels. So in this sense, the atonement was not absolutely necessary.”⁶

II. In What Way is the Atonement a Necessity?

A. Hypothetical Necessity

1. This view of the atonement teaches that, based on the sovereign freedom of the God for whom nothing is impossible, he could have chosen to save his people by a means other than the vicarious atonement of Christ. While he ultimately *has* decreed to save by the shedding of Christ’s blood, there is nothing inherent in the nature of God or the nature of forgiveness that makes this absolutely necessary.⁷
2. This view doesn’t want to put any restrictions on the freedom of God to do as He pleases when He pleases and how He pleases to do so.
3. The Hypothetical Necessity view argues that the only reason that the atoning death of Christ was necessary is because that is the way that God decreed it to come to pass, while He was free to save through other means.
4. Who held to this view?
 - a. Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin.⁸
 - b. “These truly hold that the necessity for the atonement is in God, but they err in maintaining that this necessity springs from his *mere will*, and not from his *nature*, and that God sovereignly chose this as one of many ways of reconciling the forgiveness of sins with himself and his moral government.”⁹

B. Consequent Absolute Necessity

1. This view of the atonement holds that it is not absolutely necessary that God save anyone. That He is wholly righteous and just, even if He never redeemed a single sinner. The fact that God has graciously chosen to rescue anyone is a free act of the good pleasure of his will. However, once God *had* determined to save man, the cross of Christ was, consequently, absolutely necessary.¹⁰
2. This view holds that the “consequence” of God’s gracious decision to save sinners is that the cross of Christ was the only option for atonement; therefore, if God is to save, then the cross is necessary.
3. “In a word, while it was not inherently necessary for God to save, yet, since salvation had been purposed, it was necessary to secure this salvation through a satisfaction that could be rendered only through a substitutionary sacrifice and blood-bought redemption.”¹¹
4. Who holds this view?

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 706.

⁷ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 518.

⁸ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co., 1938), 369.

⁹ Archibald Alexander Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1863), 309.

¹⁰ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 518.

¹¹ Murray, John. 1955. *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 12.

- a. Irenaeus, Anselm, John Owen, Francis Turretin, Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, Louis Berkhof, John Murray, and John MacArthur.¹²

C. Summary

1. **Hypothetical Necessity:** God could have saved another way, but chose the cross.
2. **Consequent Absolute Necessity:** Once God chose to save, the cross was the only way consistent with His nature.
3. These views show us how Christians have wrestled with this question. But the decisive answer must come from God's Word. How does the Bible itself speak about the necessity of the cross?

III. What Does the Bible Say about the Necessity of the Atonement?

A. Jesus's Prayer

- **Matthew 26:38–39** — *38 Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. 39 And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.*
 1. We see Jesus right before his crucifixion praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. His soul is sorrowful, he is perspiring blood, all because of the weight of what He is about to endure for the sake of sinners. His one request to the Father is that this cup pass from Him, but Jesus submits Himself to the will of the Father.
 2. What does Jesus mean when He says, "Let this cup pass from me"?
 3. "The 'cup' points to his suffering, as he endures God's wrath for the sins of humanity."¹³
 4. Jesus is asking that if it is possible, if there is another way to accomplish the Father's plan, then let the wrath of God, the 'cup' pass from Him.
 5. "It seems that this prayer, which Matthew takes pains to record for us, shows that it was *not possible* for Jesus to avoid the death on the cross which was soon to come to him (the "cup" of suffering that he had said would be his). If he was going to accomplish the work that the Father sent him to do, and if people were going to be redeemed for God, then it was necessary for him to die on the cross."¹⁴

B. After Jesus's Resurrection

- **Luke 24:25–26 (ESV)** — *25 And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"*
 1. We see Jesus on the Road to Emmaus walking with His two disciples. The disciples were sad that Jesus had been crucified, but His response is staggering! Jesus claims that His death was necessary, not optional.
 2. Jesus then continued to show these disciples from the OT all that was spoken of Himself. The prophets had foretold his death.
 - **Isaiah 53** — *1 Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? 2 For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, And as a root out of a dry*

¹² John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 518.

¹³ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 395.

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 706.

ground: He hath no form nor comeliness; And when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He is despised and rejected of men; A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: And we hid as it were our faces from him; He was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, And carried our sorrows: Yet we did esteem him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 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. 6 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. 7 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. 8 He was taken from prison and from judgment: And who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living: For the transgression of my people was he stricken. 9 And he made his grave with the wicked, And with the rich in his death; Because he had done no violence, Neither was any deceit in his mouth. 10 Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. 11 He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; For he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, And he shall divide the spoil with the strong; Because he hath poured out his soul unto death: And he was numbered with the transgressors; And he bare the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.

C. Hebrews 2

- **Hebrews 2:10 (NASB95)** — *For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.*
- **Hebrews 2:14–17 (NASB95)** — *14 Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. 16 For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. 17 Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*
 1. Verse 10 says that it was fitting, or consistent with the nature of God, that in bringing many sons to glory, the author of salvation should be made perfect through sufferings. Christ's death wasn't foreign to the nature of God, but rather in line with his nature.
 2. Verse 17 says that Christ *had* to be made like mankind so that he could make propitiation for the sins of the people.
 3. Election is based on God's own will, not man's will. That's the point that Paul argues in Romans 9.

D. God hates sin and can't let it go unpunished

- **Psalms 5:4–6** — *4 For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: Neither shall evil dwell with thee. 5 The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: Thou hatest all workers of iniquity. 6 Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: The LORD will abhor the bloody and deceitful man.*

- **Exodus 34:7** — *Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.*
- **Nahum 1:3** — *The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, And will not at all acquit the wicked: The LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, And the clouds are the dust of his feet.*
- **Romans 1:18** — *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;*
 1. If God is love, why couldn’t He simply forgive? Why demand blood?
 2. While it is true that God is loving, good, and kind, God is also holy, just, and righteous. He hates sin with intensity. For sin to go unpunished, how just of a God would our Father truly be?
 3. The penalty for sin has always been death. When Adam sinned in the garden, his futile attempts to clothe himself with fig leaves were inadequate. The payment for sin has always been taken in blood. God had to kill innocent animals to clothe Adam and his wife properly.
 4. The Law couldn’t be kept by man. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We were all condemned to death. The Levitical sacrifices couldn’t save man.
 - **Hebrews 10:4** — *For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.*
 5. The good news is that God loved us. Even though we were sinners, the enemies of God, as Romans 5 puts it, Christ died for us. He died in our place. He became the payment for our sins.
 - **Romans 5:6–10** — *6 For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. 8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. 10 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.*
 - **Galatians 3:13** — *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:*
 6. “The magnitude of God’s love is manifested by the extraordinary cost that he is willing to absorb in order to accomplish our rescue. Yet it is unthinkable that the Father would unleash the fullness of his righteous fury on his beloved Son, in whom he was well-pleased, unless it was absolutely necessary—unless this price was the only means of securing his desired end.”¹⁵
 7. God’s own justice and truthfulness demand that sin cannot simply be overlooked. Scripture says he “will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex. 34:7), and since God cannot lie (Heb. 6:18), his righteous wrath must be fully expressed against sin. The cross of Christ is the place where God’s righteousness is displayed, as the penalty for human sin is borne by a substitute (Rom. 3:25; Gal. 3:13). Because God requires justice, salvation had to come through a sacrifice that

¹⁵ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 519.

turned aside his wrath. Only in this way could he remain both perfectly just and the gracious justifier of his people (Rom. 3:26).¹⁶

- **Hebrews 9:19–26 (CSB)** — *19 For when every command had been proclaimed by Moses to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, along with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll itself and all the people, 20 saying, This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you. 21 In the same way, he sprinkled the tabernacle and all the articles of worship with blood. 22 According to the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. 23 Therefore, it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves to be purified with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with hands (only a model of the true one) but into heaven itself, so that he might now appear in the presence of God for us. 25 He did not do this to offer himself many times, as the high priest enters the sanctuary yearly with the blood of another. 26 Otherwise, he would have had to suffer many times since the foundation of the world. But now he has appeared one time, at the end of the ages, for the removal of sin by the sacrifice of himself.*
8. “There was no other way for God to save us than for Christ to die in our place.”¹⁷
 9. “As the people of God, we behold the special brilliance of the infinite glory and worth of Christ’s atonement when we consider that not even almighty God himself could have accomplished our salvation in any other way. If anyone was to enjoy the saving grace and beneficent mercy of the God who saves, the cross of Christ was absolutely necessary.”¹⁸

Conclusion:

Jesus’ death on the cross was not a random event, but the necessary expression of God’s perfect justice and infinite love. While God was under no obligation to save anyone, once He purposed to redeem sinners, only the atoning sacrifice of Christ could fully satisfy His righteous wrath and secure forgiveness. The Scriptures make it clear that the cross was not optional—Jesus had to suffer and die to accomplish the salvation of His people. This truth assures us that our reconciliation with God is complete and unshakable, resting entirely on Christ’s finished work. Knowing this, our response should be one of awe, gratitude, and a life devoted to the One who bore the penalty we deserved.

¹⁶ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 519.

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 707.

¹⁸ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 519.