
Introduction

Central to the redeeming work of our Lord Jesus Christ is His death for our sins. The doctrine of the atonement explains both why Jesus, as God's Son, had to die and what He accomplished through His death as our Savior. Scan the QR code or go to (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-death-of-christ/>) to access an essay by Stephen Wellum, which this lesson is based on, that gazes deeper into the mosaic of the atonement.



Opening Reflection: Why did Jesus have to die?

Key Scriptures:

- **1 Corinthians 15:3-4** – "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."
- **2 Corinthians 5:21** – "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."
- **Acts 2:23** – "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."
- **Mark 8:31-32** – "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again."

The Biblical-Theological Context of the Cross

The death of Jesus does not come to us in a vacuum. It is situated in the grand narrative of Scripture. We must understand four foundational truths to grasp the significance of the cross:

1. **Who God Is** - God is the Creator and moral standard. He is holy, just, loving, and good. His law reflects His nature, and He cannot overlook sin.
 - **Genesis 1:1** – "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

- **Leviticus 19:2** – "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."
 - **Deuteronomy 32:4** – "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice."
2. **Who Humans Are** - Humans are created in God's image, made to live in covenant relationship with God. However, Adam's disobedience brought sin into the world, and all humanity shares in this fallenness.
- **Romans 5:12** – "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."
3. **The Problem of Sin** - Sin separates us from God and brings death. Because God is just, He must punish sin. Redemption is only possible if His justice is satisfied.
- **Romans 6:23** – "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."
4. **Who Jesus Is** - Jesus is the Son of God, fully God and fully man, the perfect representative and substitute for humanity. He came to fulfill God's justice by dying for our sins.
- **Hebrews 2:17** – "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."

How does understanding the gravity of your sin and God's justice make you more grateful for Christ's sacrifice?

Scripture's Description of the Cross

The Bible presents the cross in a variety of ways, all of which are interrelated and give us a fuller understanding of what Christ's death achieved. These descriptions are not isolated; rather, they complement each other.

1. **Obedience** - Jesus obeyed the Father's will perfectly, even unto death, as our representative.
 - **Romans 5:19** – "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."

- **Philippians 2:8** – "And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."
- 2. **Sacrifice** - Jesus' death is a sacrificial offering for our sins, taking our place under God's judgment.
 - **Ephesians 5:2** – "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."
 - **1 Peter 3:18** – "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God."
- 3. **Propitiation** - Christ's death satisfies God's wrath against sin, turning God's anger away from us. Christ is the propitiation for our sins, not only for Jews but for all who will believe throughout the world (cf. John 10:15, 26).
 - **Romans 3:25** – "Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith."
 - **1 John 2:2** – "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."
- 4. **Redemption** - Jesus' death purchases us, paying the price to set us free from the bondage of sin.
 - **Mark 10:45** – "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."
 - **Ephesians 1:7** – "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace."
- 5. **Reconciliation** - Christ's death brings us back into a right relationship with God, ending our alienation.
 - **Romans 5:10-11** – "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."
 - **Colossians 1:19-20** – "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."
- 6. **Justice and Justification** - Jesus' death upholds God's justice and declares us righteous before Him.
 - **Romans 3:26** – "It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

- **Romans 5:9** – "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God."
7. **Victory/Conquest** - Jesus' death defeated the powers of sin, death, and Satan, bringing victory to God's people.
- **Colossians 2:15** – "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him."
 - **Hebrews 2:14-15** – "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."
8. **Moral Example** - Christ's death is an example of perfect love and sacrifice for us to follow.
- **John 13:14-15** – "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."
 - **1 Peter 2:21-22** – "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps."

Which of the descriptions of Christ's death (obedience, sacrifice, propitiation, redemption, etc.) most deeply resonates with you, and why?

The Fullest Explanation of the Cross: Penal Substitution

The central explanation of the cross is through **penal substitution**, which upholds God's justice and secures our salvation. "Penal" refers to the penalty our sins deserve, and "substitution" refers to Jesus taking that penalty in our place.

- **Romans 3:24-25** – "and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith."
- **2 Corinthians 5:21** – "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Christ's death was necessary because of God's justice, and it was effective because Jesus was our substitute. Through His sacrifice, God offers us **forgiveness, reconciliation, and victory over sin**.

The Great Exchange: Imputation

In justification, Christ's righteousness is credited to us, and our sin is credited to Him—so that we stand before God not in our own merit, but in Christ's perfect obedience. This exchange involves both Christ's **active** and **passive** obedience, both of which are essential for our salvation.

1. **Active Obedience:** Christ's Righteousness Imputed to Us

Christ, as the second Adam (Rom. 5:12–21), perfectly fulfilled the law of God in every respect. He did not merely die for us; He also lived for us. By His active obedience, He earned the righteousness that is credited to all who are united to Him by faith (Phil. 3:9; 2 Cor. 5:21). Without this, we would be pardoned yet left without the positive righteousness required to stand before a holy God.

2. **Passive Obedience:** Our Guilt Imputed to Christ

Christ's passive obedience refers to His willing submission to the suffering and wrath of God in our place, culminating in the cross. As our substitute, He bore the penalty of our sin (Isa. 53:4–6; Gal. 3:13), satisfying divine justice so that we might be forgiven. Through this, our guilt is removed, and we are freed from condemnation (Rom. 8:1).

Both aspects are necessary: without Christ's passive obedience, we would remain under the curse of the law; without His active obedience, we would lack the righteousness required to enter God's presence.

This is why Paul proclaims, *“For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Cor. 5:21). The Great Exchange is *the heart of the gospel*—our sin laid upon Christ, and His righteousness laid upon us, securing our full and final acceptance before God.

In what ways does the reality of Christ taking your place under God's judgment affect your relationship with Him?

Reflection Questions

1. Since Jesus perfectly obeyed God's law on your behalf, how does His righteousness shape your desire to live in obedience to God today?
2. Knowing that Jesus willingly suffered and bore the penalty for your sin, how does His sacrifice influence your daily repentance and gratitude?

3. How might reflecting more deeply on the suffering and victory of Christ enable spiritual endurance, even in the face of difficulties? How might it help you share the gospel with nonbelievers?
4. Christ's death is not only for our personal salvation but also for reconciliation with others. How does this challenge you in your relationships, particularly with those who have wronged you?

On Atonement: John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*

The truth expressed rests upon the recognition that the law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. It demands not only the full discharge of its precepts but also the infliction of penalty for all infractions and shortcomings. It is this twofold demand of the law of God which is taken into account when we speak of the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ as the vicar of his people came under the curse and condemnation due to sin and he also fulfilled the law of God in all its positive requirements.

In other words, he took care of the guilt of sin and perfectly fulfilled the demands of righteousness. He perfectly met both the penal and the preceptive requirements of God's law. The passive obedience refers to the former and the active obedience to the latter. Christ's obedience was vicarious in the bearing of the full judgment of God upon sin, and it was vicarious in the full discharge of the demands of righteousness. His obedience becomes the ground of the remission of sin and of actual justification.

2nd London Baptist Confession, 5:5

The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit once offered up to God, has fully satisfied the justice of God,³² procured reconciliation, and purchased an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father has given unto Him.³³

³² Heb. 9:14, 10:14; Rom. 3:25–26

³³ John 17:2; Heb. 9:15