

S T U D Y G U I D E



The Cross of Christ

by R.C. Sproul



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Renew your Mind.

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The Need for an Atonement

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

Ask 10 people what the purpose was of the life and death of Jesus Christ and you are likely to get 10 different answers. This entire series of lectures is designed to show that the Cross of Jesus is central to His life and ministry—indeed to the whole Bible. The aim of this lecture is to underscore the necessity of an atonement. Without an atonement there is no possibility of reconciliation between sinful people and a holy God.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To show the central importance and necessity of the Atonement to biblical Christianity
2. To examine the apparent indifference which exists in the culture and the church toward the Atonement
3. To survey the main views of the Atonement in the history of the church
4. To introduce the ways in which sin is described in the Bible

QUOTATIONS

The centrality of the Cross originated in the mind of Jesus Himself.

—John R. W. Stott

If the Cross of Christ is anything to the mind, it is surely everything—the most profound reality and the sublimest mystery. . . . The more unbelievers deny its crucial character, the more do believers find in it the key to the mysteries of sin and suffering.

—Samuel Zwemer

The emphasis in redemption is on our sorry state—indeed our captivity in sin—which made an act of divine redemption necessary.

—John R. W. Stott

Christ is to us just what His Cross is. All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what He did there. . . . Christ, I repeat, is to us just what His Cross is. You do not understand Christ till you understand His Cross.

—P. T. Forsyth

To deny the necessity of atonement is to deny the existence of a real moral order.

—J. Gresham Machen

LECTURE OUTLINE

- I. A subdivision of theology is Christology: The person and the work of Christ.
 - A. The universal symbol of Christianity is the cross.
 - B. The Cross of Christ crystallizes the essence of the ministry of Jesus.
 - C. Because the Cross of Christ is of central importance, it is essential that Christians have some understanding of its meaning in biblical terms.
- II. Within the church today, the significance, centrality, and necessity of an atonement is widely challenged.
 - A. Often people say they are not concerned about Christianity because they are not persuaded of the personal need of atonement.
 - B. Our culture does not understand that individuals are ultimately accountable to God for their lives.
 - C. If people knew these two things, they would break the doors down to get into our church, asking, “What must I do to be saved?”
 1. There is a holy God.
 2. Sin is an offense against a holy God.
 - D. The prevailing notion today is that justification is by death.
- III. There are three kinds of theology historically: Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, and Augustinianism.
 - A. Semi-Pelagianism and Augustinianism have been and continue to be debated issues within the church.
 - B. Pelagianism, Socinianism, and modern liberalism are essentially non-Christian because of their denial of the Cross of Christ as an atoning act.
 - C. Take away the Cross and you take away Christianity.
 - D. In Pelagianism there is no salvation, savior, or atonement because none is necessary.
- IV. There are three basic views of the necessity of the Atonement.
 - A. Absolutely unnecessary
 - B. Hypothetically necessary: a view that God chose to do something, and having chosen the Atonement, was compelled to follow through with it

- C. Absolutely necessary: biblical mandate that because of sin, God had to act if anyone was going to be saved
1. The heart of the issue has to do with the nature of the character of God and of sin.
 2. There are three distinct ways that the character of human sin is described biblically.
 - a. A debt
 - b. An expression of enmity
 - c. A crime

CHECK YOURSELF

1. What key notion is no longer agreed to by the vast majority of people?
2. Circle the three basic types of theology mentioned in the lecture.

a. Presbyterian	e. Calvinistic
b. Pelagian	f. Arminian
c. Lutheran	g. Augustinian
d. Semi-Pelagian	
3. The prevailing notion is that justification is by _____.
4. Pelagianism is non-Christian because of its denial of the Cross as an _____ act.
5. The Bible clearly teaches that the Atonement is _____.
6. Name the three views of the Atonement discussed in the lecture and briefly describe each.
7. What two key ideas are at the heart of our understanding of the Cross?
8. Define three ways in which sin is described in the Bible.

ANSWERS ARE FOUND AT THE END OF THIS LESSON.

BIBLE STUDY

In his book *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott provides an insightful analysis of the New Testament accounts of the centrality of the Cross. The following Bible study relies upon work he did in the first chapter of that book.

The fact that a cross became the Christian symbol, and that Christians stubbornly refused, in spite of the ridicule, to discard it in favour of something less offensive, can have only one explanation. It means that the centrality of the Cross originated in the mind of Jesus Himself. It was out of loyalty to Him that His followers clung so doggedly to this sign. What evidence is there, then, that the Cross stood at the centre of Jesus' own perspective? (*The Cross of Christ*, p. 25).

1. Listed below are passages from the Gospels which reveal Jesus' perspective about the centrality of the Cross. Parallel accounts are sometimes included. Read and discover the purpose that Jesus taught concerning His own crucifixion.
 - a. Jesus' predictions of His own death:
Mark 8:29-32
Mark 9:30-32; Matt. 17:22-23
Mark 10:32-34
Matt. 17:9-13; Mark 9:9-13; Luke 9:44
Mark 10:35-45; Matt. 20:20-28
Matt. 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19
Matt. 26:2
Mark 14:3-9
Luke 22:14-20
Matt. 26:47-56
 - b. Peter and Paul taught extensively about the Cross. Read each passage below in light of Jesus' understanding of His death. Note any way in which the apostles altered, emphasized, or elaborated upon Christ's teaching. How do you account for differences and distinctions?

PETER

Acts 2:22-24
Acts 3:12-20
Acts 4:8-12
Acts 5:29-32
Acts 10:34-43
1 Peter 3:18

PAUL

Acts 13:16-41
Acts 14:15-17
Acts 17:2-3, 22-31
Acts 28:23-31
Rom. 3:21-25
Rom. 5:9-10
Rom. 6:3
1 Cor. 1:18-25
1 Cor. 2:1-2
1 Cor. 15:1-5
Gal. 3:13-14
Gal. 6:14
Phil. 2:6-8

- c. The differences and distinctions can be accounted for by: _____

2. Read the following passages and write a short summary of each. What do you learn from them about the absolute necessity of the Atonement?
Matt. 5:17
Acts 13:38-39
Rom. 5:8-10
2 Cor. 5:19
Gal. 2:16
Heb. 9:14-16
3. For further study, read John's account in Revelation of the Lamb who was slain as a sacrificial victim in order to redeem His people. (John makes 23 references to the Lamb and His role in providing the necessary atonement.)

THINK ABOUT IT

1. To what extent does the pluralism of our society affect our view of the necessity and centrality of the Cross?
2. Why do most people not see the need for an atonement?
3. What are the effects of a failure to understand adequately the Atonement in the church?, in the culture?
4. Is it fair to assert, as Dr. Sproul does, that Pelagianism and liberalism are essentially non-Christian? Discuss.
5. What reasons do people give when denying the necessity of the death of Jesus?
6. Is it possible to hold a defective view of the Atonement and still be a Christian? Why?
7. Christians believe that Christ is the only way to salvation. Why do people consider that narrow-minded? Do you think it is?
8. How would most people react to the idea that we cannot be accepted by God apart from the death of Jesus Christ?
9. How would you respond to a person who felt no need for Jesus Christ?
10. Read the statement of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 and Galatians 6:14. Why is the Cross central to the preaching of Paul? How is the Cross central to your life?
11. Do you think of yourself as a sinful person? Why or why not?
12. Dr. Sproul suggests that there are at least two ways for God to respond to sin. If God did not care about sin, what would that indicate about His nature and character?
13. The more God is removed from the culture, the less the weight of sin is felt. Sin becomes redefined; it is no longer an offense against a holy God. What are the modern views of sin that dominate our culture (movies, radio, television) and our thinking (psychology, sociology, ethics)?

14. Respond to this statement made in the lecture: "Take away the reconciling action of Christ from the New Testament and you have nothing but moralisms which are anything but unique and hardly worthy of persuading people to give 10 per-cent of their take-home pay to."
15. Based upon what you have learned about the nature and character of God, why is the Atonement absolutely necessary for salvation?
16. How would culture and society change if people did pursue their need for atone-ment? Do you know of any biblical time periods when this was so? Do you know of any periods in church history when this occurred?

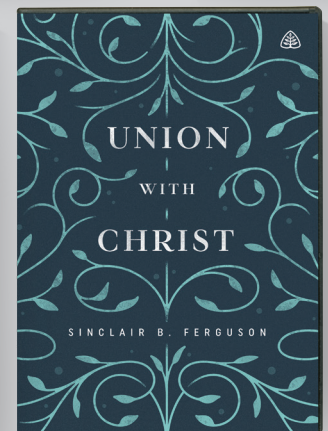
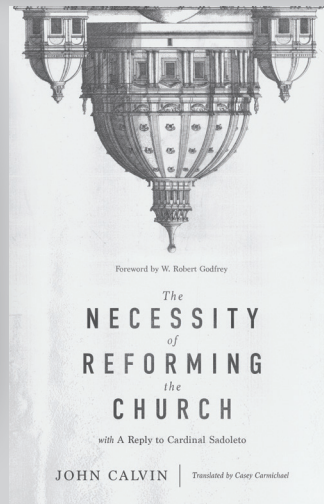
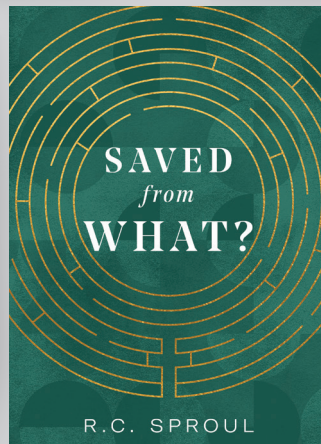
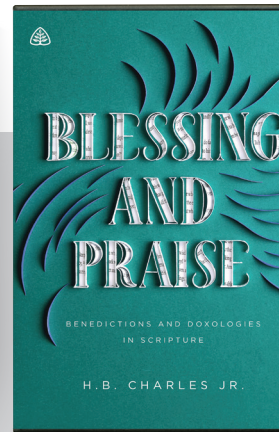
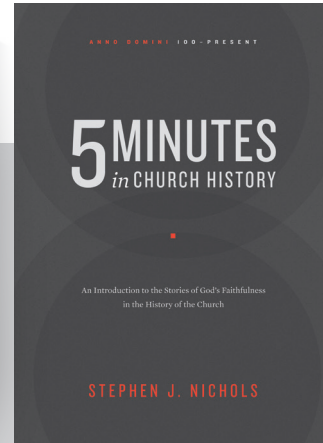
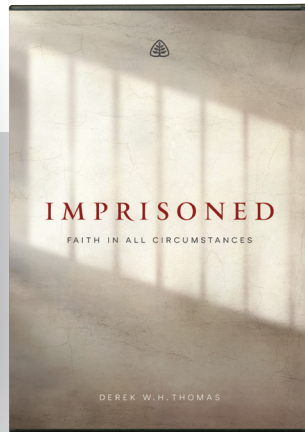
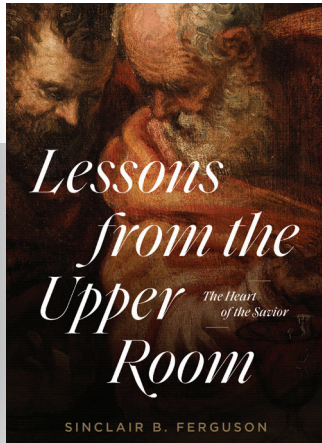
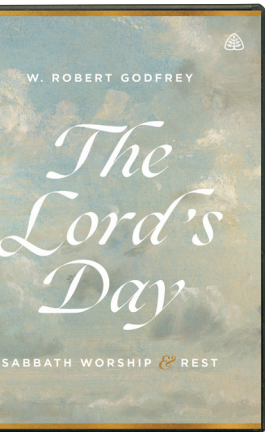
APPLICATION

1. This week, talk with two Christian friends and ask them what the death of Jesus means to them personally. In addition, ask two non-Christians to answer this question: What was the purpose of the life and death of Jesus Christ?
2. Consciously record how frequently the cross comes into your awareness during the day. How frequently do you see it as jewelry, in church architecture, and on bumper stickers? How do you account for its widespread popular imagery, con-sidering that it evokes such little response from people in the culture?
3. Visit both a Christian and a secular bookstore. Analyze what is available in both stores in light of the absolute necessity of the Cross in redemptive history. What do you have in your own personal library that relates to the Cross of Christ? Refer to the bibliography on page 75 for further study suggestions.

"CHECK YOURSELF" ANSWERS

1. The idea that every person will be held accountable by God for his life.
2. b, d, g
3. death
4. atoning
5. absolutely necessary
6. a. Absolutely unnecessary. According to this view, the death of Christ is seen as an act of heroism or self-sacrifice, but it is not necessary.
b. Hypothetically necessary. According to this view, God could have redeemed sinful people by a variety of methods or means, but He chose to redeem us through the death of Christ.
c. Absolutely necessary. According to this view, redemption could be accomplished only in the manner revealed in the New Testament.
7. The nature and character of God and the nature and character of sin.
8. a. Debt: the failure to do what we are obligated before God to do
b. Enmity: the hostility and broken relationship which results from a failure to live in obedience and submission to God
c. Crime: the violation of the law of God

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