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## The Necessity of the Atonement

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*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up  
for us all, how will he not also with him graciously  
give us all things? —Romans 8:32*

WHAT A MAGNIFICENT statement we find in the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. The tremendous assurance it expresses is an incomparable privilege to those who can take it with them through life and into eternity. As we stand at the foot of this great mountain peak of a text, we must gain our footing and understand the journey that has led us to such a majestic crag. In particular, we must focus on verse 32, which gives glorious assurance and comes at the heart of the climactic

conclusion of Romans 8, the Everest of the New Testament and a high peak of all biblical writing.

Romans 8 is a rhapsody on assurance that amplifies chapter 5:1–11, Paul’s first statement of Christian assurance in this letter, which begins and ends as follows: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

After this first passage on the assurance that God gives to the justified, Paul discusses the Christian life. This is found most explicitly in Romans 7:7, where he asks, “What then shall we say? That the law is sin?” thereby pinpointing the relationship between the law and sin. Paul answers that question in the second half of Romans 7, by giving a most poignant testimony to his own experience as a Christian, saying in effect, “My reach after perfect obedience to the God whose law is good exceeds my grasp. And so I aim at holiness, and again and again fall short.” He sums up this dilemma in 7:22–23: “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” He didn’t enjoy saying that because he really did delight in the law of God in his inner being. Paul would happily have given his hands and his feet to be able to achieve perfect obedience to the law of God. He would have given anything to be able to encompass that, but he couldn’t do it. And the plain statement that he couldn’t do it is given in order to show that there is nothing sinful about the law. Paul, however, does connect the law which forbids sin (which simultaneously stirs up sin in him so that his reach after righteousness always exceeds his grasp) and, on the other hand, his actual achievement.

After Paul acknowledges what was true of him, he acknowledges that the same is true of every other Christian. He cries out from his heart in terms that he is sure will issue from every other Christian's heart as well: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). He then quickly answers his own question (for, of course, he knows the answer) in verse 25: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Notice that the answer is in the future tense just as the question was.

The situation described in the second half of Romans 7 leaves Paul (and his readers) miserable. There's no joy in reflecting on your reach exceeding your grasp, causing you to acknowledge, day by day, "I aimed at perfection and I didn't make it. I have fallen short. Forgive me my trespasses dear Lord." After remembering what it is that the law tells us about ourselves—namely, that we aren't the righteous persons that we ought to be—Paul now wants to restate the substance of Christian assurance. We weren't righteous before we became Christians, and we still are not even as Christians. But Paul isn't going to let the law get the last word, so to speak, and lock us into the sadness that comes from thinking of moral inadequacy, failure, and shortcoming. Paul now intends to restore our assurance by reminding us of what the gospel says about us. The gospel must have the last word in the Christian's assurance and Paul makes sure that it does. Chapter 8 begins with the liberating promise of no condemnation and ends with the promise of no separation from the love of Christ; the blessings that belongs to those who are in Christ.

To be in Christ is a precious relationship and has several levels of meaning. Very simply, it means that you, by faith, unite yourself to him, come to him, and embrace him from the human side. Behind it all stands the precious doctrine of election by God's eternal choice. And in between the two great promises

that this relationship affords, Paul has celebrated adoption, new life, the hope of glory, and strength for our weakness. In short, he has looked at, from every standpoint, the certainty of our being kept in grace until finally we are brought to glory. That is the theme of this great final paragraph and the peroration of the whole passage.

Let us now look at four propositions found in Romans 8 that can be inferred from the hope that flows from justification. The first proposition is that no opposition can succeed against us: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). Many can try to oppose us, but none can succeed. Not man, and not Satan.

Skipping proposition two momentarily, proposition three is that no accusation can stand against us: “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom. 8:33–34). If any should appear before the throne of God—even Satan himself—to accuse us of being unfit for the kingdom, God will simply send him away. God, by his grace, is bringing us to his kingdom and he has secured our justification. He has pronounced an “eschatological verdict,” which simply means that the verdict belonging to the final judgment has been brought forward in time and pronounced now, so that you and I may rejoice and face that final judgment with the assurance of justification. We are already accepted and nothing can ever change that. That’s tremendous, isn’t it?

Also tremendous is the assurance found in proposition four, which closes the chapter and promises that nothing in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom. 8:35). Nothing and nobody can ever do it.

Paul ends the chapter on a tremendously high note of certainty and assurance.

Let us now return to proposition two, which I made my final point because it is the focus of what I want to discuss. The argument of proposition two is that since God has already done the greatest thing imaginable to benefit us, we can be 100 percent certain that every lesser benefit of salvation through the death of Christ will be given us: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). Those lesser benefits (if we can even call them that) will cost the Father less than our justification cost him. To justify us, he had to give his Son to endure the agony of Calvary’s cross. If he did that to save us, we can be sure that every good thing that he can envisage or we can conceive will be given to us as well.

This colossal fourfold assurance that we have found in the final paragraph of Romans 8 is the Himalayan range of Scripture with Romans 8:32 as perhaps its highest peak. The point that we must get clear on is that all of this assurance, salvation, and glory, which is ours now in foretaste and will one day be ours in fullness, comes to us only through the cross of Christ. Given this great fact, the most marvelous thing in God’s creation, the most wonderful thing in world history, is that God loved sinners and sent his Son to save them.

I am simply saying, as loudly and as clearly as I can, that everything rests on the atonement. Without Calvary, we would not have hope of escaping the hell that we truly deserve. We have fallen short of the glory of God and lived our lives, more or less, in obedience to sin. We wish God didn’t exist so that we could be at the center of the universe, and, accordingly, we try to live that lie as if it were the truth. Christ’s death is the springboard for everything that’s said about salvation in the book of Romans.

We need to understand the necessity of that death in order to grasp its glory and begin to appreciate its wonder. I strongly believe that the glory of the atonement begins here, but frankly I didn't always see it as clearly as I do now.

Once upon a time, I went to visit a friend at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, in the days when Dr. John R. de Witt was professor of theology. One day my friend asked me if I had any interest to listen to Dr. de Witt teach. I was indeed interested, so we quietly slipped into his classroom and sat down on the back row. I didn't know Dr. de Witt then as well as I do now, but he seemed to recognize me as I entered the classroom. He was lecturing on this subject of the necessity of the atonement, and without prior warning, he introduced me to the class and asked if I had anything to contribute to the topic.

Frankly, I don't enjoy recounting this particular event. What did I do with Dr de Witt's kind recognition and question? I sat on the fence. As far as I know, my motive was good; I didn't want to disrupt any of the impressions that he might have been giving or speak against anything that he might have said. But we never serve God well by simply playing it safe and evading issues. That's what I did and I wish, in retrospect, I hadn't.

My exact answer was something along the lines of, "Well, Reformed theologians have always been divided about this; there have been two views." As Fanny, the woman who was Ebenezer Scrooge's young love interest in *A Christmas Carol* exclaimed, "What a safe and terrible answer!" Let me explain to you in detail what I meant.

Both views assume the basic wonder of God's grace, namely, that he resolves to save sinners. The first view has tremendous support for it and can claim Augustine in the fifth century, Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, a sentence in John

Calvin's writing in the sixteenth century, Samuel Rutherford (who wrote those wonderful letters) in the seventeenth century, and in more recent times, the great Dutchman, Herman Bavinck. All argued for the necessity of the cross and the atonement but called it relative, hypothetical, or conditional. According to this view, the atonement depended on a further decision of God to save those whom he had resolved to save in this way, as distinct from doing it any other way. Those who take this view talk as if it was in God's power to save his elect by some means other than the substitutionary, sin-bearing atonement of Calvary, but in fact, he chose to do it this way.

The second and opposing view possesses equally impressive support. In the seventeenth century, giants like John Owen, the English Puritan, and Francis Turretin took this view. In the past century, the towering Louis Berkhof also took this second view. And all of these theologians looked back to Anselm and his epoch-making work on the atonement from the eleventh century, *Cur Deus Homo*, or *Why did God Become Man?*, in which he argued that the necessity of the atonement was absolute. Anselm and these other great men believed that if God once resolved to save guilty sinners, then this way of Calvary was the only way he could do it. The marvel of Calvary is that God's love, wisdom, and righteousness all met together there. Those three aspects of God's holy character met together at Calvary, and this explains the necessity of the atonement.

It's sad to look back on that little episode in Dr. de Witt's classroom. It was a very poor performance on my part, and I really am ashamed of it. I ought not to have had any doubt about which was the true view, just as the fellows on the wrong side ought not to have had any doubt either because Romans 8:32 is so clear. Paul says that God did not spare his own Son. That language points to the certainty that this was an appallingly

costly venture on the part of God the Father. If he could have spared his own Son and still redeemed, we may be sure he would have. God doesn't make needless gestures. The Father's sacrifice of the Son tells us, as sure as eggs are eggs (as we used to say back in England), that it had to be done this way. Our redemption couldn't be achieved at any lesser cost. If the gesture had been needless, it wouldn't have been a wonderful display of love. The glory of Calvary as the demonstration of God's love would be like a punctured balloon. If it were not necessary, then there is nothing wonderful about it after all.

James Denney, a Scottish writer of the past, while in the process of refuting the view of the atonement held by Abelard<sup>1</sup> in the early thirteenth century (Abelard was arguing against Anselm's view), pictured it in the following way: Suppose I am sitting on the pier in the sunshine, on a seaside holiday. While I am sitting there enjoying the sunshine, a man rushes up to me and says, "Look, I'll show you how much I love you!" and then jumps off the end of the pier and is drowned. Denny argued that this wasn't a display of love but rather a display of idiocy! It doesn't mean anything. It's only a display of love if the person who gives his life is doing something for me that had to be done to save me and that I couldn't do for myself.<sup>2</sup>

This is what the New Testament says about Calvary, and, therefore, it is a wonderful demonstration of love. Had it been a needless gesture, there would have been no force behind Paul's conclusion in Romans 8:32: "How will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" You couldn't be certain of the latter promise if God's former action had been foolish and had caused

1. Abelard had said that the cross reveals the love of God and then went on to deny that the cross actually was the necessary act of God for putting away the sins of those whom he loved.

2. James Denney, *The Death of Christ* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1951), 103.

unnecessary suffering to himself. Paul doesn't seem to allow for that possibility according to his cry of praise: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Rom. 11:33). Paul knew better than Abelard and the very phrasing of verse 32 indicates clearly that our salvation had to be accomplished through the sacrifice of the Son or it couldn't be done at all.

Thus, the greatest sacrifice ever was offered. The greatest gesture of love ever was made. He spared not his own Son but gave him up for us all. The New Testament always measures the love of God by the greatness of God's gift of Christ to die on Calvary. When I talk about the necessity of the atonement these days, I wince inside as I remember sitting on the fence in Dr. de Witt's classroom. I speak about the matter very strongly because I believe that I've seen something that I missed before and I don't want anyone else to miss it. To affirm that the necessity of the atonement is basic to the glory of the atonement, I will answer two questions that verse 32 directly prompts. These questions belong together and the answer is clear and far-reaching in both cases.

The first question is whether or not the atonement was necessary. Why couldn't God just forget sin like the liberals are always saying he can? We do that often enough when we are dealing with someone who has done us harm, but later comes and honestly apologizes, showing genuine sorrow for what they did. We say, "Let bygones be bygones!" We simply forgive and leave the matter there. "Why couldn't God do that?" ask the liberals. "Is God less than man?"

The Scriptures very plainly answer this question by saying God couldn't simply let bygones be bygones because the judgment of sin was necessary. And the judgment of sin was necessary because God has a moral nature and a moral character that made it necessary. God cares for the difference between right

and wrong in the way that he does because he is a God whom Scripture describes as holy and just. God, therefore, must judge sin because it is in his nature. He must reject sin, show his displeasure at sin, punish sin, and inflict on sin the retribution it deserves. When we talk about the necessary judgment of God, this is the idea that we are expressing.

Now, God doesn't exact judgment for arbitrary reasons, thereby doing something that he didn't have to do, as I argued earlier. He doesn't do it simply for policy reasons to make an impression on people, as Abelard mistakenly supposed. He does it because of the necessity that arises within his own Being. He is the sort of Being and the sort of God who must judge sin and we can see this truth in the Scriptures. But apart from what the Bible tells us, we really don't know anything of the awful nature of sin and the awful holiness of God. If we forget that we really don't know anything, we are kidding ourselves.

The ultimate mistake of liberal theology is to suppose that man is capable of judging God's self-revelation in Scripture and reconstructing what the Bible says in light of man's spiritual "wisdom." This is sheer nonsense. It is the fundamental mistake that produces the many specific mistakes of liberal theology. I beg you to recognize that apart from the light of God's Word, we are in darkness concerning spiritual realities. Humble your mind and prepare yourself to listen to and take seriously what the Bible says.

I start by reminding you of what the Bible says about the nature of sin. We use the word with a merely social meaning. We use it to signify certain types of behavior acted out by one human being against another. This is a bad start because we are secularizing a theological word whose meaning in Scripture is always conceived and defined in terms of a wrong relationship to God. God is the reference point for defining sin, not other

humans. The Scripture goes further and tells us how God sees sin. It's God's view of sin that is given in the Bible and that we must adopt.

John Owen, the great Puritan of whom I spoke earlier, in his monumental work on sin, wrote a paragraph in which he summarizes God's view of sin. Read with care the words that Owen used to describe how the creature acts towards his Creator: disgrace, fraud, blasphemy, enmity, hatred, contempt, rebellion and injury, poison, stench, dung, vomit, polluted blood, plague, pestilence, abominable, and detestable. Sin is essentially the resolve—the mad, utterly blameworthy, but nonetheless, utterly firm resolve—to play God and fight the real God. Sinners resolve to treat themselves as the center of the universe and so they keep God at bay on the outer circumference of their lives—or so they think. They won't allow the Creator to rule over them as he wills to do. If they appeal to God at all, they ask God to act according to their will and for their convenience like a servant who gets them out of trouble and bestows on them good gifts. They never serve him from the heart and only resent the claim to dominion that he makes. This is why people like Luther, Calvin, and Owen say, roundly and without question, that sin wills the fundamental abolition of God. Sin wills that God should not be there. Sin plays God, sin fights God, and sin wishes that God didn't exist at all.

It should be easy to see that this attitude produces a monstrous guilt. This is a horror in God's world, and the Bible treats sin as horrible. One of the ways in which sin is presented to us in Scripture (and the references are too great for the space allowed) is as uncleanness. In English, we have a four-letter word for this: dirt. You probably cannot help recoiling at something dirty. Think of your reaction if you were asked to sleep on obviously dirty sheets or to eat your lunch off obviously dirty plates.

Similarly, God cannot help recoiling from that attitude in man that expresses itself in fighting him, defying him, and willing him out of existence. You cannot wonder that he hates the abominations which sin produces. God is holy. Sin is uncleanness in his eyes and he hates it.

Then again, Scripture also says God is just. This means God does everything right and deals rightly with everyone. God expresses his justice by dealing with sin as sin ought to be dealt with. Doesn't your own conscience tell you, and hasn't it always told you that when you've done wrong you ought to be punished? Denney, of whom I spoke earlier, once declared that the most universal experience is a bad conscience. Everybody knows that condemnation of conscience of which Denney was thinking. Conscience doesn't always register by God's standards, but in telling us that sin—our wrongdoing recognized as wrongdoing—merits punishment, our conscience is, in truth, acting as the voice of God. Paul actually refers to conscience this way in the second chapter of Romans, when he discusses the way the consciences of those who have never been exposed to God's standards have something of the law written on them. Conscience can excuse, but conscience also accuses. The just God will deal with sin as sin deserves.

In the first great doctrinal section of the letter to the Romans (Rom. 1:18–3:20) Paul talks about the ongoing justice of God in his judgment on sin. The certainty in this section is that God is going to judge the world. In addition, God's judgment will be according to truth against all those who do evil. We can expect that sinners will be rejected and condemned for their sins. The background of the good news of the gospel is the bad news about the sinfulness of sin and the certainty of sin's judgment. The first section of Romans and many other places in the New Testament affirm the certainty of that judgment. Indeed, the whole Bible proclaims the certainty of God's judgment.

This must not be regarded as presenting any kind of moral problem as it often is today and has been in the past. On the contrary, we must regard it as the solving of all moral problems. The real moral problem is that God allows sin to run riot in his world. People ask, “Can that be right for God to do?” The Bible answers, “Just wait a moment. God will not allow it forever and sin will one day be judged according to what is deserved.”

This is what we must expect from the God of the Bible. He is not a God who keeps his hand hidden forever. One day, he will show his hand by public judgment on all sin as that sin deserves. The day of judgment is unimaginable. Don't try to imagine it because your imagination will simply fail and you will come to the conclusion, “Well, then, it cannot be like the Bible says it is after all.” Don't ever be so foolish as to make the measure of your mind the measure of what God can do! God has said what he will do. He will judge all the sin of the human race—past, present, and in whatever future it has, when that day of judgment comes.

God didn't have to choose to save anyone. God didn't have to love sinners after they'd lapsed into sin. But he does have to judge sin because he is that sort of God. This is why the atonement is necessary. The wrath of God, which is against sinners, that judicial resolve to reject sinners for their sin, has somehow to be dealt with. That wrath has to be, to use the technical word, propitiated. In Romans 3:25, the word that in the Greek is *propitiation* is sometimes translated as “sacrifice of atonement.” Similarly, John refers to the Lord Jesus as “the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 2:2; 4:10). But translating it as “sacrifice of atonement” doesn't convey what the word actually means. The word *propitiation* in the New Testament expresses the concept of a “wrath absorber,” which quenches the judicial wrath of God.

The need for God's wrath to be quenched leads us to our second question. Assuming again that God's purpose is to save sinners, why was the atonement so costly? Why must God send his Son to the shame and agony of the cross? Remember that in order to fulfill his saving purpose towards sinners, God must do justice. God must judge sin. God must be just and manifest his righteous judgment against sin. Paul states this quite explicitly in Romans 3:24–26. Verse 24 explains his reference in verse 21 to the righteousness given by God, which reconciles us to God. This is the gift of righteousness that constitutes our justification, which came freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

As an aside, let me just say a word about that term *grace*. It's a word that existed in secular Greek before the New Testament was written, but in that context, it meant only "gracefulness of conduct." It didn't mean what grace means in the New Testament. Prior to the writing of the New Testament, no one had ever thought the thought that the word *grace* came to express. That thought is what we teach children in Sunday school by using *grace* as an acronym: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. It is the thought of God in mercy giving to the limit in order to bless and save sinners.

Thus we are justified freely by grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus, which Paul explains in verse 25. God presented Jesus as a propitiation to quench his wrath. A propitiation effected by his blood and effective for us who are justified through faith. God did this to demonstrate his justice. We see that in the middle of verse 25: "This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins." Paul is looking back not simply to sins committed during Jesus' lifetime, but to sins committed during the whole Old Testament era. Paul aims to reassure us that God had

remitted the sins and forgiven the sinners during the period when sins were atoned for through animal sacrifices according to the Old Testament ritual. But those offerings, though commanded by God and issuing in the forgiveness of sin, couldn't put away the sin of a human being permanently. The basis on which sin was forgiven wasn't clear back then. Thus, there was a puzzle: how was God being just in passing over the sins as he does?

That question is answered as he sets Jesus forth before the whole world, dying in shame as a condemned criminal on a Roman cross. Paul explains that God did this "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" (Rom. 3:26). The New Testament gospel is of just justification. It's of justified and justifiable justification. Justification is not God shutting his eyes to sin; justification is the fruit of God's dealing with sin through the death of his Son. Jesus endured the true taste of hell for us on Calvary's cross.

The essence of hell is God-forsakenness. The experience of hell was testified to when Jesus said, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Jesus knew perfectly well why he was forsaken, but he asks this question to quote Psalm 22:1. He did this to reveal to his hearers that he was tasting hell for them and let them know that Scripture was being fulfilled. Scriptural prophecy was being fulfilled in what was happening to him and that, surely, is how that word from the cross is to be understood.

God displays his righteousness by judging sin as sin deserves, but the judgment is diverted from the guilty and put on to the shoulders of Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God acting as wrath absorber. The atonement had to be costly because it was necessary in light of the nature of God, which must inflict retributive punishment on sin. A marvelous wisdom of God consists in his establishing the Lord Jesus as our representative and our

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substitute because only he could bear and absorb the judgment due to us. Being our representative makes him our substitute, and so he suffers and we go free, just as Isaiah 53 predicted so long ago. God's righteous servant justifies us.

Now you know what Gethsemane was all about. Now you know what the Savior was looking forward to when he sweat great drops of blood (cf. Luke 22:44). Now you see what lay behind Luther's perceptive comment, "Never man fear death like this man." He had to enter into the experience of hell for you and me. He who spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all has given us perfect certainty and absolute assurance that every good thing will be given to us as well. Nothing he can think to give us now will cost him as much as Calvary. This is the message of our text, and the truth about the necessity of the atonement. This news must be passed on as basic when we proclaim the good news of the gospel.

I would like to conclude with a poem by Joseph Hart, that great Evangelical hymnodist of two centuries ago. I don't call it a hymn because it's an address to men and women, not direct praise to God. But it's also a poem, and it's a poem that crystallizes what's been said and sums it up with wonderful clarity and force. Read it carefully, for this is the true gospel.

Oh ye sons of men be wise, trust no longer dreams and lies,  
Out of Christ, all mighty power can do nothing but devour.  
God you say is good, that's true.  
But he is pure and holy too, just and jealous is his ire burning,  
with vindictive fire.  
This had all been self-declared: Israel trembled when they  
heard,  
But the proof of proofs indeed is he sent his Son to bleed.  
When the blessed Jesus died God was clearly justified.  
Sin to pardon without blood never in his nature stood.

*The Necessity of the Atonement*

Worship God, then, in his Son, there his love and there alone.  
Think not that he will or may pardon any other way.  
See the suffering Son of God panting, groaning, sweating  
    blood,  
Brethren this had never been had not God detested sin.  
Be his mercy therefore sought, in the way himself has taught.  
There his clemency is such, we can never trust too much.  
He that better knows than we, God himself bid us now to  
    Jesus flee.  
Humbly take him at his Word and your souls will bless  
    the Lord!