RANSOM AND REDEMPTION

The Price of Freedom

In this chapter we investigate two more of the New Testament’s crucial terms. They are ransom and redemption.

In their literal sense they were in common use in the ancient world, just as they are in ours. People were kidnapped and held for ransom. Their family and friends would then have to pay a large sum of money for their release. Modern terrorists hijack a plane and threaten to kill the passengers one by one, or else to blow up the whole plane, unless their demands are met. They may not ask for money: their demand might be the release of fellow-terrorists previously caught and imprisoned by the government. In this case, we still use words like ‘price,’ and ‘cost,’ and ‘ransom,’ but now in a metaphorical sense; and we say that the release of the terrorists is the price that the government would have to pay to ransom the planeload of passengers from death, unless they took the risk of storming the plane.

It is important to notice here that you only use the word ‘redeem’ if you are buying someone out of prison and slavery, or out of the threat of death, into freedom. You would not use the words ‘ransom’ or ‘redeem’ to describe the activity of corrupt businessmen who, in some countries, are prepared to pay a lot of money to buy little girls from their poor parents in order to use them as child-prostitutes. They would be buying these girls, not to free them from slavery, but to enslave them.

In certain circumstances people can even redeem something that is their own property. A man who urgently needs money may decide to pawn his watch. The pawn-broker will take the watch and give the man an amount of cash. But the watch does not immediately become the property of the pawn-broker. For a certain period of time, the watch, strictly speaking, remains the original man’s property. But if he wants to regain actual possession of his property, he must redeem it within that time, that is, buy it back; and the price he will have to pay will, of course, far exceed the amount he originally received from the pawn-broker.

In everyday speech, then, the words ‘ransom’ and ‘redemption’ carry several slightly different connotations, some literal, some metaphorical. Similarly in the New Testament, though here, in theological contexts, the terms are always used in a metaphorical sense. There is no thought of any money-transaction. “You were not redeemed with silver or gold” says the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 1:18). But running through all the New Testament usages are the following themes:

1. Buying, or buying back, people from debt, or slavery, or imprisonment or threat of penalty, or death.
2. Always it is God or Christ who is said to do the buying, or redeeming. No man is said to redeem himself or his fellow-man.

3. The paying of a price, or ransom. And here again it is only God or Christ who is said to pay the price or bear the cost of the ransom. People are never asked, or allowed, to contribute anything to the price that had to be paid for their redemption. This is in striking contrast to many religions in which people are required to achieve salvation at the cost of their own self-effort or suffering, or even by the payment of money. When the priests and merchants in the temple at Jerusalem gave the people the impression that they could and must pay for salvation, Christ drove them all out (John 2:13-16).

4. The purpose of redemption is always to bring people into freedom and to enrich them with an eternal inheritance.

**FREEDOM FROM WHAT?**

1. **Freedom from the guilt of past sins.** One cannot undo the past. God himself cannot change history. What has been done, has been done. What God offers us through Christ is release from the guilt of past sins. Many people are haunted by the past. Much as they try to forget what has happened, and to start afresh, they cannot shake off the guilt of their previous misdeeds.

   Others, with a less-well-functioning conscience, find that they can easily dismiss their past, like the adulteress in the Book of Proverbs (30:20) who “eats and wipes her mouth and says: I have done no wrong.” But such irresponsibility does not break the chain of real guilt (we are not concerned here with psychological guilt-complexes). Some years ago, robbers in Great Britain assaulted a train, injured the driver for life, and absconded to South America with millions of pounds of money. There they bribed the authorities not to extradite them. Perhaps the robbers now feel no guilt over their crime. But that makes no difference to the fact that if they set foot in Britain they would immediately be prosecuted and imprisoned. One day every man and woman will find themselves in God’s court. The mere passage of years, or a conveniently short memory, will not have wiped out the past. Unless they have allowed Christ to remove the guilt that chains them to their past, the chain will remain eternally.

   Redemption signifies that God can break those chains for us in this life if we will repent. The act of breaking the chain is called forgiveness. In the original Greek of the New Testament, the most frequent word for forgiveness (aphesis) means ‘release’ or ‘discharge.’ It is a word that is used of releasing someone from prison, or of discharging a debtor, or of setting a slave free. And the cost of this release is paid by Christ: “we have redemption” says the New Testament, “through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins” (Ephesians 1:7). Thus the chain is broken never to be re-placed. The redemption Christ has paid for is an eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:11-12).

2. **Freedom from the curse pronounced by God’s law.** “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).

   The curse pronounced by God’s moral law is no empty form of words. It is the pronouncement of the penalty that must eventually follow every transgression of that law. Some may be inclined to argue that, since they do not believe in God, they do not recognize his right either to issue commands and prohibitions or to impose penalties. But the argument is false. The Creator’s moral law is written on every human heart (Romans 1:14-16). Every
time we accuse someone of having done something morally wrong, every time we excuse ourselves for some moral misdemeanor, every time we tell ourselves we ought to behave better, and promise to do so next time, we are, unintentionally maybe, witnessing to the fact that the moral law is written on our hearts and that we assent to its authority and validity. It is as though, to use a New Testament metaphor, God’s moral law had been put before us written out on a document, and by our accusations of others, excuses of ourselves, and moral resolves to do better, we had personally signed our names at the bottom of the document, agreeing to its authority, demands, and penalties.

Those who do not repent will find this “document” with their own signature on it, produced as evidence against them at the Final Judgment. But those who do repent are assured by God himself that he has blotted out this legal bond signed by our own hand acknowledging our guilt, this “handwriting that was against us;” and he has nailed it to the cross of Christ. God has thus advertised before the whole universe that, by dying on the cross, Christ has borne the curse of the law for all who repent and trust him, so that they can go free (see Colossians 2:13-15).

**THE COST OF REDEMPTION**

The ransom paid for the redemption of mankind was nothing less than the death of Christ. In fact, He himself declared that this was the main purpose of his coming to our earth: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). “You were redeemed,” says 1 Peter 1:18-19, “with the precious blood of Christ.”

To grasp the immensity of the cost of the ransom, we need to remember who Christ is:

> In him we have...the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:14-17).

In other words, the Redeemer is none other than the Creator incarnate. Jesus is both God and man. And that is how he could act as the mediator between God and man, and give himself a ransom for all (1 Timothy 2:5-6). It was not, as some people have imagined it, that Jesus, who loved mankind, had to pay this ransom to some unkind God to persuade him not to pour out his wrath on the human race. He who paid the ransom was God. And the love which moved Christ to give his life as a ransom for men was a perfect expression of the love of the Father for men; for Christ, being himself God, was and is the perfect image and expression of the invisible God. “This is love” says the New Testament (1 John 4:10) “not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

“But in that case,” says someone, “if Jesus did not pay the ransom to God, to whom did he pay it? For he must have paid it to somebody.” But to argue like that is to forget what we noticed earlier on, that the term ‘ransom’ in these contexts in the New Testament is being used as a metaphor to express the cost to God and to Christ of our redemption. The cost was not a literal money-payment which some third party could receive. The cost was that of suffering and death.
Suppose a lifeboat is overcrowded and in danger of sinking, and a man voluntarily jumps overboard into the ice-cold sea, knowing it will mean his death. We might well comment that he paid a very heavy price to save the lives of the remaining passengers. But it would not make sense to ask: “To whom did he pay this price?”

But another question arises. The Bible teaches that we are all God’s creatures, and therefore his property. Why then must God pay a ransom, or anything at all, to buy back his own property? Granted we have enchained ourselves in sinful habits, and have played into Satan’s hands and become his prisoners. Why could not God simply exercise his almighty power, destroy Satan, break our chains, and bring back all mankind to himself by force, without having to pay any ransom?

The answer is that the question of sin is a moral question; and you cannot settle moral questions by force. There are certain things that even Almighty God cannot do. He cannot do logically impossible things like drawing a square circle. Neither can he do morally unrighteous things. He cannot lie (Titus 1:2). He cannot break his own moral law. His law is the expression of his own character. Deny it, and he would deny himself; and that he cannot do (2 Timothy 2:13). It was not open to him to loose us from the chains of our guilt by a simple act of arbitrary power. The only way of doing it was first to pay the penalty which his moral law demanded. And that in love he did for us. Hence the cost; hence the suffering.

**FREEDOM FOR WHAT?**

We earlier observed that if you buy someone in order to subject them to slavery, the price which you pay cannot be called a ransom. Now Christ has paid the ransom to deliver people from the guilt of their sins and give them freedom. But freedom for what? Well, obviously not so that they can now carry on sinning with impunity. For sin is addictive and makes slaves of those who constantly and unrepentantly practice it (Romans 6:16-23). Here then is a statement of what Christ redeems his disciples from and what he redeems them for:

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” (Titus 2:11-14).

We must leave to a later chapter the question of how Christ guarantees that this new way of life shall turn out to be a life of freedom, not of religious slavery. For the moment, let us notice that the New Testament makes it quite clear that we are not given the full fruits of our redemption here and now. Included in the benefits which Christ’s ransom has obtained for us is the “redemption of our physical bodies.” But for that we must wait until the Second Coming of Christ (Romans 8:18-25; Philippians 3:20-21).

On the other hand, God does here and now give to all who repent and put their faith in Christ the gift of the Holy Spirit. That Holy Spirit assures all believers of the reliability of all God’s promises, and is himself the earnest and pledge of the full inheritance that will one day be theirs, when God redeems all his promises and takes to himself in heaven the people whom he once purchased with the blood of his Son (Ephesians 1:13-14; Acts 20:28).