

“Ransom,” “Redemption,” and the Death of Christ

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Here is some Old Testament background for the idea of “ransom”:

Therefore the **ransomed ones** of the LORD will return and come with singing to Zion, and everlasting joy will crown their heads. . . and sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isa. 35:10)

Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O **arm of the LORD**; awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the Dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, so that the **ransomed ones** might cross over? The **ransomed ones** of the LORD will return and come with singing to Zion, and everlasting joy will crown their heads. . . and sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isa. 51:9-11)

Hear the word of the LORD, O nations. Proclaim it in distant coastlands: He who scattered Israel will gather them, and will watch over his flock like a shepherd. For the LORD will **ransom** Jacob and redeem them from the power of those stronger than they. They will come and shout for joy on the hilltops of Zion, they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD. . . and they will sorrow no more. (Jer. 31:10-12; note the close parallels with the Isaiah passages above)

Who pays ransom to whom, to achieve what? The **who** is the LORD, who metaphorically pays the ransom price to Egypt or to Babylonia to free his people out of captivity. There are some other biblically supported ways of constructing the transaction, one of which we see in Isa. 43:3-4:

I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel. I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I give people in exchange for you, human beings in exchange for your life.

In this case, the party that holds Israel captive is probably to be understood as the Destroyer, and God gives Egypt, or other nations, over to the Destroyer, in exchange for Israel’s being set free. This goes back to the Passover story, in which the LORD says,

I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both human beings and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No plague from the Destroyer will touch you when I strike Egypt. (Exod. 12:12-13)

When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the door-frame and will pass over that doorway, and *he will not permit the Destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.* (Exod. 12:23).

Modern Westerners are going to have a hard time with this concept, but there are two things going on here. First, the LORD is understood to have an agent, an angelic being, who does his work. For that reason the LORD can be found saying interchangeably in Exodus, “I will do such and such” or “My angel will do such and such.” That is also where we get the ambiguity as to whether it was the LORD who appeared to Moses in the burning bush or an angel, and whether it was the LORD who wrote the ten commandments on the tablets with his finger on Mount Sinai or whether it was his angel (see, e.g. Acts 7:30, 35, 53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). Generally speaking, New Testament writers consider the supposedly “direct” acts of God in the Old Testament to have been accomplished by angelic agents.

The application of this concept to the Passover is that the Destroyer is going to go through Egypt and exact a payback on the Egyptians for killing the firstborn sons of Israel. The LORD protects the

Israelites from the over-zealous Destroyer by providing a substitute for them in the Passover lamb. The lamb for each household is like a “Get Out of Death Free” card that the LORD gives them to present to the Destroyer when he comes to their houses. The LORD therefore ransoms Israel’s firstborn from the Destroyer, so that the firstborn of the Egyptians get the whole brunt of the Destroyer’s thirst for death. In this way the LORD can say, “I bought your passage out of Egypt.” Not that he paid the Egyptians a ransom price, but that he paid off the Destroyer in Israel’s case, and that allowed them to remain unscathed when the Destroyer killed the firstborn of the Egyptians. And that event—the killing of all the Egyptian firstborn—was the event that unlocked the door for Israel to leave. This is why, according to the Law, every first-born male of Israel for all time after that has to be redeemed by the sacrifice of a young animal:

Every first-born of man among your sons you shall redeem. And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both the first-born of human beings and the first-born of cattle. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb; but all the first-born of my sons I redeem.’ (Exod. 13:13b-15)

Thus, according to this logic, it was the *firstborn* of Israel that were ransomed/redeemed, and only less directly the whole nation. And so it says in Numbers:

Because all the firstborn are mine; for on the day that I killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I set aside for myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They are mine: I am the LORD. (Num. 3:13)

God saved the lives of their firstborn from the Destroyer in Egypt, so from now on the people of Israel always “owe him” the lives of their firstborn. Thus, when the Israelites “redeem” their firstborn sons with a lamb generation by generation, they are not paying the LORD back for the lives of their sons (evening up the score), but rather acknowledging in a ritual way their eternal indebtedness to him for their lives. Let’s see some more use of this concept in the OT. Here is Psalm 130:7-8:

O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is abundant **redemption**. And he will **redeem** Israel from all his iniquities.

For the Israelites, the idea of “redemption” is not first an abstract religious concept, but rather the concrete idea of being bought out of captivity. Their national experience was that sin not only put individual people in a kind of personal, moral captivity, but sin also caused the nation to go into the corporate captivity of geopolitical exile. When the Psalmist here says, “he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities,” he’s probably thinking that the LORD will forgive and lead Israel out of the sins that cause Israel to go into exile. Here is yet another way of looking at “redemption”:

Who is this that comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he that is glorious in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength? “It is I, announcing vindication, mighty to save.” Why is your clothing red, and your garments like his that treads in the wine press? “I have trodden the wine press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trampled them in my anger and stamped on them in my wrath; their lifeblood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my clothing. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and my year of **redemption** has come. I looked, but there was no one to help; I was appalled, but there was no one to uphold; so my own arm brought me victory, and my wrath upheld me. I trampled down the peoples in my anger, I made them drunk in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.” (Isa. 63:1-6)

We can see from this passage that “redemption” doesn’t necessarily require “ransom.” One can redeem—i.e. rescue—captives by sending in a swat team and killing the captors. In that case the captors themselves “pay” with their lives for the redemption of the captives.

There is a third way in which redemption or ransom can be accomplished. The third way is to offer to suffer a penalty that another person owes.

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the **redemption** which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:23-26)

Paul's argument in Romans is that the Law puts all human beings under the penalty of death, because no one obeys the Law. Thus, he says here, Jesus Christ comes to us for God to annul the Law's jurisdiction to condemn by voluntarily facing its death penalty on behalf of all. He thus redeems—if they, by faith, are willing to be redeemed—both those who are under the law and also those who have not known the Law. God through Christ Jesus proclaims a full amnesty to all who will appropriate it by faith. In that way God is both able to be fair (in implementing the Law with its just penalties) and to forgive (i.e. to justify) the person who trusts in Jesus.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and **redemption** (1 Cor. 1:30)

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for “He who through faith is righteous shall live”; but the law does not rest on faith, for “He who does them shall live by them.” Christ **redeemed** us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree” --that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal. 3:10-13)

This passage is very explicit. Jesus deliberately faced the curse of being killed and having his body hung on a tree. Having your corpse exposed by being hung up was a death penalty practice so dehumanizing that although God did not forbid it entirely, he would not allow it to go on overnight (otherwise the land would be defiled by the indecency of it—Deut. 21:22-23). Jesus faced the worst human punishment known in the Law, in order that those who rely on him in faith might be redeemed from all penalties of the Law.

In him we have **redemption** through his blood, the forgiveness of our wrongdoings, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us. (Eph. 1:7-8)

...The Father. . . has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have **redemption**, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:12-14)

...Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to **redeem** us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Tit. 2:13-14)

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal **redemption**. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may

receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which **redeems** them from the transgressions under the first covenant. (Heb. 9:11-15)

Let's now look the New Testament occurrences of the word "ransom."

lutron: "a ransom," an amount paid to buy someone out of slavery. Mt. 20:27-28 || Mk 10:44-45:

... whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

antilutron: "a ransom," "ransom price." 1 Tim. 2:6:

...God our Savior, who wants all human beings to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings: Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a **ransom** for all human beings—the testimony given in its proper time. And for this purpose I was appointed a news-bearer and an apostle.

Observe: In none of the above passages is there any hint that what we are being redeemed from is a *wrathful attitude on God's part*. Jesus does not die in order to change God's attitude towards us. He dies so that God, who loves us, can forgive us sinners while still fulfilling the provisions of the Law he gave to Israel.

It is a false gospel to say that *Jesus Christ suffered God's wrath and rejection in order to quench the wrath and rejection of God towards sinners*. If you think about it, it is very easy to express this concept. It stands in complete clarity in bold in the first sentence of this paragraph. Yet if you search the New Testament, you will never once, among dozens of references to the redeeming work of Christ on the cross, find this idea expressed.

Let's look, for example, at *all the sermons in Acts that mention the cross*. Every one of these says that rebellious human beings rejected and killed Jesus, and that God exalted him.

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. (Acts 2:22-24, 36; see also the prayer in 4:24-30)

But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. (Acts 3:14-15)

...if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a cripple, by what means this man has been healed, be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. (Acts 4:9-10)

And the high priest questioned them, saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." (Acts 5:27-32)

[Stephen preaches to the council:] You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. (Acts 7:51-53)

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. (Acts 10:38-43)

Brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you that fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning him. Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead... Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. (Acts 13:26-39)

I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen: that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:23)

Some of these sermons refer to the death of Christ as predestined, prophesied, and even planned by God. However, this *raises*, rather than *answers* the question, "Why was it foreordained this way?" No New Testament author answers this question by saying God needed a way to take out on Jesus the wrath and rejection that he bore towards us. That is simply not the transaction being preached. There are, in reality, two reasons why Jesus' death was foreordained:

First, God understood in a way not understood by humanity, that humanity was in deadly enmity towards *him*. "He came to his own, but his own did not receive him" (Jn. 1:11; see also 15:23-25). His intention was to *meet* humanity in servanthood and vulnerability, in order to show us just how much he loves us, his enemies. *By making that decision in Christ, God effectively foreordained the death of Christ at our hands*. It was our deadliness towards God that predestined Christ to die at our hands, not God's deadliness towards us. If you want to see what God's attitude was towards us, look at Jesus.

Second, God, in his infinite wisdom, humility and love, had a plan through which our very rejection and murderousness towards him could be transformed into life-saving grace. When we killed his Son, showing ourselves utterly worthy of death, he appointed that very death at our hands as the mercy seat, the ransom, the redemption from all claims that stand against any person, whether in heaven or on earth. If any being on earth has a claim against you, that claim cannot stand either now or in the last judgment if you repent and appeal to the death of Christ on your behalf. If any angelic accuser, such as Satan, puts forth any accusation against you, no matter how true, that accusation cannot stand in the last judgment if you repent and appeal to the death of Christ on your behalf. This is the double sense in which

He bore our infirmities and carried our sorrows;

We saw him as being struck by God, beaten, tormented by him,
Yet he was being pierced from our wrongdoings, crushed from our sins:
The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
And by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have run away and gotten lost,
Each of us turned away down our own trail;
And the LORD laid on him the wrongdoing of us all. (Isa. 53:4-6)

The LORD laid our wrongdoing on him first in that he experienced our wrongdoing, to the greatest degree, in his own body. Second, while we were expressing that deadliness towards him, he was bearing the consequences of all our wrongs, all the wrongs we have ever done and will ever do. In that way, no power can ever separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, for he has paid off all our debts.

This is what Paul is talking about when he says in Colossians,

... you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the debt-certificate that stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him. Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col. 2:12-17)

And Ephesians:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph. 2:11-18)

In these passages it is the *accusations of the principalities and powers, the enmity between groups of human beings, and the enmity of human beings towards God* that has been defeated and counteracted by Christ's death, not God's wrath or rejection of us.

Let's wrap up by considering the logic of the atoning sufferings of Christ in relation to our own sufferings. I have argued against the idea that Christ's sufferings quenched the wrath and rejection of God towards us so that we could be accepted. If Christ's death occurred not because we hated him, but because God needed to quench his own wrath towards us in order to forgive us, then *Christ's sufferings and our sufferings as Christians are utterly different from one another*. Under that thinking, when Christ suffers, he suffers from God, and when we suffer, we suffer from human beings. In fact, a great percentage of American Evangelicals embrace doctrines whose substance is that God would never ask his people to suffer major human persecution for him—for Christ has suffered in our place to free us from suffering. They emphasize the idea that Christ would never allow his bride to be dragged through the mud of persecution.

But notice how this absolutely falls apart in the face of Paul and Peter's teachings:

Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. (Gal. 6:17)

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church...(Col. 1:24)

For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:19-25)

When we are persecuted for our love of God, our sufferings are in deep continuity with the sufferings of Christ. There is no discontinuity as to where the hostility comes from. Which brings us back to the very words of Jesus, which most people cannot help but tune out or water down:

He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it. He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me. (Mt. 10:38-40)

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Mt. 16:21-25)

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But all this they will do to you on my account, because they do not know him who sent me. (Jn. 15:18-21)