

Redemption

Ephesians 1:7-8 | Bryce Beale | Sept. 3, 2017

“The issue of faith,” writes R. C. Sproul, “is not so much whether we believe in God, but whether we believe the God we believe in.”¹

I would be surprised to find more than five or six of you who wholeheartedly reject the facts of the gospel: that Jesus, the Son of God, descended to this earth, ascended the cross, rose from the grave, and returned to heaven.

But it would be equally hard to find among us five or six who wholeheartedly *believe* these same facts that we believe.

This was, I think, the indictment one preacher gave to Christendom, that “we know more than we are.” There is a gap between what we assent to, and what we surrender to; what we know, and what we really believe.

So when I preach, instruction is only half my aim. If it was the whole of my aim, you would be better served to read commentaries on Sunday mornings. It would save you a drive at least.

But more is happening here, we hope, than instruction. We gather on the Lord’s Day not only to learn, but also because we believe that God, through this means of grace, will further close the gap between what we know and what we believe.

It will not work, not even biologically, to have our hearts far from our brains, perhaps down in our foot. No, let the heart be where God placed it, within reach of the mind.

I have observed this need even in my own times of Bible study and prayer. In high school I would carry my Bible and a notebook to every class, and when there was any down time, I would open and begin to study. And I can distinctly remember walking through a hallway of that school, or floating maybe, propelled by the excitement I felt at the things I was discovering in God’s word.

So recently I decided to take up my old method of study, with notebook and Bible, but I didn’t immediately feel the same spark. I endured, but I wondered why there was the difference.

And then, during one of my times of study, God made it clear to me: the difference was not to be found so much in how well I could get data out of this book, but in how much faith I exercised toward the data I had.

¹ *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 35.

One tenet of the Scriptures believed is worth one hundred merely known.

I mention this because today we take up an old, old story, a topic quite familiar to most of you, and to myself. So I feel that the half of my labor, in explaining the meaning of the passage, will not be difficult. But it is the other half, which only God can do, the working of faith in our hearts toward what we know, that we crave this morning.

Therefore my whole intention in the minutes that follow is to look closely at these verses, verses 7 and 8 of Ephesians chapter 1, and by meditation to press them into your minds. And may God grant that when you rise from your seat next, the gap between your knowledge and your faith will be smaller than it is now.

EPHESIANS 1:7-8

I think it will prove helpful for us to begin this passage at its end, and then to work back toward its beginning.

The tone

For Paul says that something has happened to us, and then says that whatever happened, happened “according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us.”

I begin here because this sets the tone for our study. We will look at what happened—namely, redemption—but we are not allowed to look at this something as though it were just one something among many.

We will not, if God might be so kind to us this morning, get away with regarding redemption as a pleasant, good, nice, decent thing. We cannot content ourselves to sip the rim of redemption, the way we might enjoy, for example, lesser blessings.

We cannot say, “Jesus loves me and died to save me from my sins,” and nod our heads, but then, upon buying a new car, beam with excitement. Paul does not say, “Wow, I got a very good parking spot today—God has drenched me with a superabundance of his divine and gracious wealth.” Yes, thank God for the car, and for the place to park it, but have a sense of proportions.

Paul does, and so he reserves this exuberant description for a blessing that is great enough to bear it. Paul says, “We’re forgiven—God has lavished upon us the infinite stores of his grace!”

Usually we hear first, and feel after; we hear good news and feel joy, or bad news and feel grief. But in this case, we are beginning with what, according to word of God, we ought to feel about what we are going to hear afterward. The tone is set. Whatever we read about, we know that

it is “according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us.” It is awesome.

If therefore you leave this message with a definition of what it means to be redeemed, but without a sense of the great and terrible weight of redemption, I have failed to preach it aright. That God would give us not only ears to hear, but a heart to believe, and that our minds and hearts would here join hands.

Egypt

Return now to the beginning of verse 7. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.”

Think of how many summers Israel passed under the hot Egyptian sun. They were not citizens of a free nation; they had no rights, no lawyers, no humanitarian groups to defend their cause. They were slaves. You do not pick your work, you do not pick your hours, you do not take vacations.

One day your ruler without explanation demands the death of your newborn son; another day he increases your already unbearable labor. File your grievances, but no one cares and none will listen.

Suffering is your portion, just as it was your parents’ portion, and your grandparents’, and so forth. The only certainties you have are the hatred of your strong captor, the futility of your hard life, and its termination at any time.

But then redemption appears.

God purchases this oppressed people—for that is what redemption means, a purchase, usually unto freedom.

The only currency your current captors will accept is a show of force; God makes the payment. He devastates the land, and with a mighty hand he leads the captives out.

Here, stop one of the Israelites in the long trail of them leaving Egypt, and ask him, “What is redemption?” Ah, that we would have a view of it like he does in this moment—not a cold, academic apprehension of the facts, but an emotional celebration!

Friends, what is Egypt compared to our captivity?

Jesus’ words are as true today as they were when first spoken: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”²

² John 8:34.

There we were—there, in fact, some of you are right now!—enslaved to that proud Pharaoh of a devil, who blinds his captives by hard and useless labor. There we were, bound by the chains of our futile way of life, shackled to an American dream invented by our forefathers and passed down to us for our doom.

There we were, with the stinging slap of a leather whip across our bare back, swung by our own lusts to drive us on toward misery. Above, the burning sun of the law baked us, exposing our miserable condition; and every day we progressed nearer to a death we feared, knowing that our lives would not improve, but only worsen when we expired and were made to give an account for our wrongs. We proved in our experience the prophet's maxim: "There is no peace for the wicked."³

That was our Egypt!

But then redemption appeared.

The only acceptable payment

Our passage explains, in verse 7, by this phrase: "through his blood."

And here, I think, the riches of God's grace are to be found, here in the price paid for our ransom. Why do men and angels marvel, and why will the church persist in her wonder "in the coming ages," throughout the long span of eternity?⁴ Because we Egyptian slaves were redeemed not merely by a mighty hand, but by the blood that flowed from that hand.

I wonder what we would have thought if the price for our redemption was told us before it was paid. Imagine that the Spirit of God had moved upon your dark and blighted soul to expose to you your sins. Under a heavy and unshakable sense of your guilt, a consuming sense of it, you cried out to heaven for redemption.

Imagine if, at that point, an angelic watcher appeared to you, and said: "If you want to be cleared of your guilt, if you want (as our passage puts it) the forgiveness of your trespasses, then you can be redeemed." At this you brighten and urge the angel to name the price—whatever it is, you will pay it.

"Well," he says, "the greatest possible wrong in this universe would be for any human, made specially in the image of God, to pervert that image by open rebellion against heaven's King. Sadly, this is not only something you have done, but it is all that you have done for many years. The guilt accumulated from it is more than you or I can calculate."

³ Is. 48:22.

⁴ Eph. 2:7.

“Furthermore,” he says, “the absolute justice of God demands not only that your guilt be punished, but that it be punished exactly to the extent that it deserves. And that extent is an eternal death, for nothing short of that can satisfy justice.”

You have by this time turned your eyes downward, and your heart has stopped hoping.

But the angel continues: “However,” and you look up, “the law does have a provision in it. It reads, ‘the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.’”⁵

Struck with a ray of desperate hope, you begin to seek a lamb or goat or calf, to shed its blood, to give its life in place of yours. But the angel reaches out his hand to stay you:

“Friend, it will not do to give an animal in your place, for a man is worth far more than any animal. And it will not do even to give the blood of another human in your place, for every human on earth is already condemned to suffer for his or her own sin. For this provision to work for you, and God’s justice to be satisfied, there is only payment that God can accept: the blood of a perfect man.”

“But,” you answer, “no one is perfect but God!”

And his reply is, “Yes, now you understand. The only payment that could redeem you from eternal miseries is this: blood from God in human form. The only acceptable redemption price is, to put it bluntly, the blood of God.”

Would you dare ask for that blood? Would you request that the omnipotent Crafter of the stars, the Former of worlds, Potentate of time, he who sustains the universal constants on which our existence depends, who inhabits eternity and watches over the sons of men, who raises up nations and collapses others, would you, a single blade of grass in the field, a wisp of breath quickly dissipated, born only yesterday, and tomorrow to die—would you dare ask God, not for some small favor, but for his very life?

Madness! It would be madness in us to ask for that blood. But in God, it would be grace to give it.

To see him take the pouch that contains the coins of his beloved Son’s life, and untie the string that seals it, and turn the sack so that out falls coin after coin into his hand—to see him lay these coins down *for us*, we

⁵ Lev. 17:11.

Egyptian nothings, we might rightly ask: “Why would this King pay so high a price for a product of so low a quality?”

And our passage would answer, that the purchase was made not according to our quality, not according to our worth or what we deserve, but “according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us.”

Forgiven

See the consequence of the purchase, in our text, set right next to redemption: “the forgiveness of our trespasses.”

Brothers, sisters, you who are truly in Christ, let me give this word to you now.

Having been bought by God, you are forgiven.

It is the word you heard when faith was first born in your hearts, however long or short ago that was. But I feel the need to say it again; I assure you that it is no less true.

You are forgiven.

You know what most easily averts your eyes from the fact of your forgiveness in Christ. “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” We are all Peter, James, and John in the garden, with our own heavy eyelids working against our sight, so that we daily fall asleep to the riches of God’s grace.

For when Christ finished his bloody work upon the cross he cried with certainty, “It is finished!” That is to say, all that is necessary to expunge the guilt of your transgressions, now and forever, is already done. “He entered,” we read in Hebrews, “once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing *an eternal redemption*.”⁶

This is the fact as it stands in heaven. But the great enemy of your soul attacks the notion in your mind every day—and the great enemy I speak of is not the devil—though no doubt he is at work—but you yourself!

Every day your own musings whisk you away from the heart of the gospel and this its great promise: “You are forgiven!”

So, if your flesh is not ashamed to yell into your ears in its attempt to drown the golden gospel notes of forgiveness, then I am not ashamed to be the voice that contradicts it even more loudly.

⁶ Heb. 9:12 (ESV; emphasis mine).

How I wish we could bring every last one of your doubtful thoughts here before us this morning, so that one by one we might dismiss these charges by the gospel of Christ.

“I,” says one, “have disappointed Christ too often, and with the same sin over and over.” But are you in Christ? Then, forgiven. Let me ask you—which of your sins precisely used up the last of the infinite atoning power of Christ’s blood? Was it your third, or tenth, or fiftieth commitment of that sin? Two thousand years the blood of the Lamb has proven sufficient for all the sins of all God’s people, but now have you used up the last few drops of it? I say, either your sins are forgiven this morning, or you have condemned the whole world by exhausting the final dregs of Jesus’ blood.

As Luther wrote to his friend Melanchthon, “Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins?”⁷

“But,” you reply, “you don’t understand the depth of my sin. I have thought things in private that I would never dare utter in the light.” But allow me to ask this in reply, “Whom have you trusted for salvation?” You say Christ. Then the question is only this: which is greater, your sin or your Savior? John Newton in his old age, his memory worn and stretched, still remembered two things: “that I,” he said, “am a great sinner—and that Christ is a great Savior!”⁸

“But I fear I will never get free from this sin.” You are already free, from its guilt and its power. “But the sins of my early life are too much to forget.” God does not share that opinion. “But the sins I committed after trusting Christ have been great.” Then it is good for you to have so great a High Priest interceding for you in heaven.

“But I feel so guilty.” Yes, but you *are* so innocent. “But I could never forgive myself.” Praise God then that you never need to; your offenses have not been against yourself but against God, and he has forgiven you.

I am saying nothing other than the most basic assertion of the gospel: if you are in Christ, you are forgiven, fully and forever. Forgiven, forgiven, forgiven. No exceptions. This is the power of the blood of Christ; this is what redemption means. He has bought you out of your sin, and you are his.

⁷ Martin Luther, “Let Your Sins Be Strong: A Letter from Luther to Melanchthon,” trans. Erika Bullmann Flores, Project Wittenburg, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/letsinsbe.txt> (Aug. 1, 1521; accessed Sept. 3, 2017).

⁸ “John Newton’s tombstone,” Grace Gems, <https://www.gracegems.org/2013/02/Newton.html> (accessed Sept. 3, 2017).

When a hostage is saved from the hands of terrorists by the U.S. military, do you expect afterward for him to be consumed with a bruise on his arm he got in the rescue process? Does he grieve and sigh, and tell everyone of his woeful plight of a bruise? No! A great salvation puts our smaller trials in perspective.

This has been a help to me: When life seems overwhelming, step back and say to yourself, “Yes, but I’m forgiven. I have no guilt, none in the sight of heaven’s Judge!” We “have” redemption, brothers and sisters. Let us drink its present blessings by faith.

Conclusion

I end now this message, but I end it at the very beginning of our passage—notice that all of these blessings, of which we have just spoken, are qualified like this: “In him.”

It hurts me to think that the blood of God’s Son, that impossible price, the “precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot”⁹—it hurts me to think that some of you now would trade a vial of that blood for a pack of cigarettes. It means nothing to you. Or, at least, it does not mean enough to be worth your time.

You would rather have your friends than the blood of Christ, your sin than the Savior. Ah, if you traded Christ and his offer for something good, that would at least do him the dignity of suggesting some worth in him. But when you profane the blood of the covenant because you prefer something shameful, something distasteful, something selfish and worthless, your sin, then you nearly do that shocking act described in Hebrews as trampling underfoot the Son of Man!¹⁰

Every step you take, even as you get up in just a moment and walk down the aisle or halls of this church, you are stepping on the name and the blood of Jesus. There is a trail of bloody footprints which follow you everywhere. Yes, you may look very kind, you may smile very widely; but always underneath your soles, there is Christ besmeared, crucified anew by your indifference to him.

But the promise of redemption is this: that even these offenses are no match for the potency of Christ’s blood. It was said of Paul, “He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.”

And may it be said of you, “He who used to trample underfoot the blood of Christ is now redeemed by it.”

⁹ 1 Pet. 1:19.

¹⁰ Heb. 10:29.