

(re)Defining Redemption

This is the first in a series of pieces where we will attempt to redefine some of the "churchy" words that are thrown around with great frequency but are sometimes poorly understood. What do we think of when we hear the word "redemption" or that we are "redeemed"? For most Christians, hearing those words invokes images found in hymns and liturgies that are a traditional part of many worship services. Commonly we will hear about being "redeemed by the blood of Jesus". We also find this language in many of the writings of the apostle Paul. The interpretation given is that we are freed from the wages of sin (death, or even worse, an eternity in hell) because Jesus died on the cross for us. However, this image, that God somehow required a blood sacrifice in order for us to be justified (made right his eyes) is incongruous with the image of God portrayed by Jesus, a God of grace, a God of infinite love and forgiveness. It therefore pays to look further to see if there are other ways that we can think about redemption.

The Greek word is "lutroo", derived from "lutron".... To loosen that which is bound, especially freeing those in prison - also, releasing someone held captive (slave or prisoner) upon payment of a ransom - also, the payment of a price to recover from the power of another, to ransom, to buy off. In order to understand how the concept of redemption was understood in Jesus' day, one must look at its usage in what we call The Old Testament, also known as The Hebrew Bible. Doing a quick word search for "redeemed" results in 40 notations, 16 of which are to be found in Isaiah. Why is this significant? It is significant because Isaiah was the most influential and formative source for the language that Jesus used. Therefore, let's look at the context in which Isaiah uses of the word. Below is a sampling of several passages in which the word "redeemed" is used:

Isaiah 29:22 Therefore this is what the Lord, who *redeemed* Abraham, says to the house of Jacob: "No longer will Jacob be ashamed; No longer will their faces grow pale."

Isaiah 43:1 But now, this is what the Lord says-he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have *redeemed* you; I have summoned you by the name; you are mine."

Isaiah 44:22 I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have *redeemed* you.

It is obvious from this and the many other notations found in the Old Testament that individuals, and humankind in general, were "redeemed" long before Jesus' death and resurrection. In fact, we see God freeing people from their sinful ways (living in ways contrary to God's will) long before Jesus arrives on the scene. What we see in the history portrayed in the Old Testament is cycle after cycle of humankind moving closer to God, only later to drift further apart. When they move closer to living in God's ways, as outlined by the prophets (living compassionately with social justice), they become freed, or in other words released, from the bondage of their destructive ways of living. This is the context in which "redeemed" is being used by Isaiah.

It is from this perspective that I use the word redemption. I am redeemed, or set free from self-destructive ways of living, by choosing Jesus' way, the way of radical love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and peace. By modeling my life after Jesus, through serving others and alleviating the suffering of others, especially those who feel oppressed or marginalized by society, I acquire new purpose and joy in life. I am freed from selfishness and greed; freed from judging others; freed from feelings of hate and vengeance toward those who mistreat me. I develop a new level of intimacy with God and others as I live my life the way God intended. Jesus' crucifixion becomes important from this perspective not as a blood sacrifice to appease God, but rather as an expression of his willingness to bring God's kingdom, this pattern of living described above, into this world even though it would cost him his life.

To say that we are redeemed simply by Jesus dying on the cross for our sins cheapens his extreme sacrifice. It is as if we are saying, "Jesus died for me so now I'm good to go. It's all done." There is nothing transformational in that simplistic interpretation. In that model, I can go on living a self-destructive life filled with greed and selfishness because after all, Jesus died for me. Regardless of how I live my life, as long as I believe, I'll go to heaven. This is certainly not what Jesus had in mind. His plea was for us to become disciples, followers of the ways he taught. I'm not saying this is easy. To the contrary, being a follower of Jesus, living our life according to his teachings, is difficult in a world that encourages us to be self-centered and materialistic. But living in his way is what truly redeems us, redeems us in a much more powerful way than simply assenting to a specific creed or doctrine that has Jesus taking our place on the cross.