

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 13
The Motif of Redemption

We've surveyed a number of New Testament motifs for characterizing Christ's atonement: sacrifice, the suffering Servant of the Lord, divine justice, representation. Today we come to a final motif: redemption.

Although there are many other elements or motifs in the New Testament used to characterize the atonement, our time permits us to deal with just one last motif, and that is the motif of redemption. What do we mean by redemption? In the ancient world the notion of redemption had to do with the buying back of prisoners of war or with the buying of slaves out of slavery. The payment that was given to redeem these persons to liberate them was called a ransom. Already in the Old Testament you have this ransom motif present. Certain Old Testament sacrifices might have a ransom substituted for them. So instead of offering an animal in sacrifice one might bring a ransom payment that could serve as a means of atonement. Similarly, in the Old Testament God is referred to as Israel's Redeemer, because he redeems Israel out of bondage and liberates his people. The difference here is that God doesn't need to pay a ransom in order to redeem people. God's great redemptive act in the Old Testament would be the Exodus which is signaled by the Passover sacrifice and feast.

When we move to the New Testament, we've already seen in Mark 10:45 that Jesus characterizes his mission as giving his life as "a ransom for many." His life served as a payment for our liberation from the captivity of sin. Similarly, other New Testament authors did not think of Christ's redeeming act was costless. Rather there was a price that was paid for our redemption. For example, 1 Peter 1:17-18 says, "you were ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish." Similarly, in Ephesians 1:7 Paul says, "In him we have redemption through his blood." Hebrews 9:12 says that Christ offered "his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption." Paul could remind his Corinthian readers, "you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20). That price was, as we've seen, the blood of Christ which was paid to redeem us from the captivity of sin.

You'll remember that at Jesus' Last Supper he characterizes his sacrificial death as inaugurating a new covenant – the new covenant that was predicted by the prophet Jeremiah. Similarly, the author of the book of Hebrews thinks of Jesus' redemptive death as inaugurating a new covenant and the forgiveness of sins. Hebrews 9:15 says, "he is the mediator of a new covenant, . . . since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant." Hebrews agrees with the Gospels in regarding

Jesus' death as a redemptive sacrifice that inaugurates a new covenant.¹ In the book of Revelation 5:9-10 John has a vision of Christ as the sacrificial lamb who redeemed by his death mankind.

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.

Notice here that the author describes Christ as a sacrificial lamb which has been slaughtered and his blood ransoms for God people from all around the world and constitutes them now as a kingdom and priests serving God.

This is the fulfillment of the frustrated intention of the old covenant – the first covenant. According to Exodus 19:6 the intent of the old covenant was precisely this. It says, “you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” But of course with the apostasy and judgment that fell upon Israel, that intention was shattered and frustrated. But now in the vision of the sacrificial lamb who gives his life to ransom people for God from every tribe, and tongue, and nation, and people, and constitutes them as a priestly kingdom that intention is finally fulfilled.

Any adequate theory of the atonement, if it is to commend itself to us as a Christian theory of the atonement, has to make peace with the biblical data that we have reviewed. Specifically, it has to take account of Christ's death as a sacrificial offering that expiates sin and propitiates God's wrath. It needs to take account of Christ's role as the suffering Servant of the Lord who is substitutionarily punished for the sins of others. It needs to take account of divine justice and how Christ's death satisfies the demands of God's justice leading to our acquittal and being declared righteous before him. It needs to account for Christ's role as a substitute and representative on our behalf before God so that we are punished for our sins in our substitute – in our representative – thereby satisfying the demands of God's justice. Finally, it needs to take account of Christ's blood and sacrificial death as a ransom that redeems and liberates us from sin and its consequences.

As we turn to a systematic summary of the doctrine of the atonement, I think we would do well to keep in mind the admonition of the New Testament scholar William Farmer. He said, “Some exegetes appear to . . . think of Christian doctrine as having come into being largely through church councils later in the history of the church. The truth is that Christian doctrine begins with biblical texts and with the earliest interpretations of those texts, which we find in the New Testament itself.”²

¹ 5:05

² William R. Farmer, “Reflections on Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins,” in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. William H. Bellinger, Jr. and William R. Farmer (Harrisburg,

START DISCUSSION

Student: Go back to God doesn't require in the Old Testament. I always thought that the slaying of the firstborn, the only future hope of Egypt was what was symbolic of Christ dying. That was part of the release as well.³

Dr. Craig: I think Jesus does think of himself in the Last Supper as the Passover sacrifice. John the Baptist in John says, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Paul presents Christ as a Passover sacrifice. But I don't think it would be right to say the firstborn of Egypt who fell under the judgment of God are a type of Christ. I don't see that anywhere in the Scripture, though it is certainly true that a doctrine of substitutionary atonement would say that Christ did bear the judgment and the penalty for our sins so that we don't have to bear it. The firstborn of Egypt, for example, didn't bear substitutionally the punishment due to the people of Israel for their sins. They just fell under the wrath of God for their own sins.

Student: Right. I see that. I was saying more of when Isaac was to be offered is like God asking you to give up hope in yourself . . . Egyptians out there. God is working with everybody. You give up hope in yourself and take the new hope which Christ is going to show when he arises.

Dr. Craig: It is certainly correct to say that Isaac is a type of Christ. The book of Hebrews makes that clear. In the sacrifice of his only beloved son as a sin offering (interestingly enough) Abraham typifies the sacrifice of Jesus as God's only beloved Son offered as a sacrifice for our sins. That connection, I think, is clear and explicit.

Student: I think it would be really interesting to see how those that hold heretical views of who Christ is – his two natures, both fully man and fully God – how would they make sense of Christ's atoning death? It seems if you deny his full humanity and full deity, it renders any of these motifs – our basic understanding of atonement – as meaningless or incoherent.

Dr. Craig: Excellent question. Is Christ's divinity essential to the efficacy of his atoning work? The typical orthodox view is, yes, absolutely! No human being – no mere mortal – could have offered sufficient atonement for the sins of mankind, and therefore the divinity of Christ is essential. I don't know what sort of doctrine of the atonement ancient heretics may have had, but if we look at the modern period, since the Enlightenment when theologians began to give up the divinity of Christ, we'll see that what they turn to was typically moral influence theories where Christ is simply an example to us of someone who was obedient unto death, who was devoted entirely to God, whose consciousness was dominated by God, or who lived a life of meaning and value even in

Penn: Trinity Press International, 1998), p. 275.

³ 10:00

the face of his own death and therefore we can do likewise and imitate him as it were. But it is certainly not going to do justice to these biblical motifs that we've talked about.

Student: One niggling question I've always had in the back of my mind about the doctrine of substitutionary atonement is the idea that Jesus is taking the penalty of our sins which is death – ultimately separation from God. For us, that penalty would be permanent. But for Jesus both types of death are only temporary. How can we say that he took the full extent of our penalty when our penalty would have been greater?

Dr. Craig: This isn't a question about the biblical data. This is a question about the coherence of the doctrine of the atonement. It is an objection that we'll see was raised by Faustus Socinus to the Reformer's doctrine of the atonement. We will discuss this later on. So I am going to put off that question until we get to that part in our class.

Student: It seems like the answer is in Hebrews 2:9 where it says he tasted death for everyone so only a being that existed for all time could suffer for everyone for all time in a moment of time.

Dr. Craig: You are responding to the last question about the need for the divinity of Christ?

Student: Yes.

Dr. Craig: OK.

Student: In understanding how someone that did deny Jesus' full humanity and full deity, if he wasn't fully human – just the problems that entail or unfold?⁴

Dr. Craig: That would be a Gnostic view, wouldn't it? That would deny the full humanity of Christ. So far as I know, the Gnostics did not have a serious doctrine of the death of Christ or his suffering because he wasn't fully human. Indeed, for them divinity could not suffer the pains of material bodily experience. So you are quite right, I think, in saying the essential humanity of Christ as well as his divinity is vital to a robust Christian biblical doctrine of the atonement. One just doesn't find these Gnostic views of the atonement in modern theology very much. Perhaps in aberrant movements like the New Age movement for example or these alternative spiritualities, sort of quasi-pantheistic Buddhist view of Jesus you might have this more Gnostic doctrine. But these are not very important in Christian theology which would deny more the deity of Christ than his humanity (I'm using the word "Christian" there obviously in a very broad sense – in the sense that these folks would teach at divinity schools that were founded as Christian institutions and would identify themselves as Christians).

Student: To say that Christ was fully human means you've laid on him – have you not? – the sin nature which he did not have.

Dr. Craig: Think about this. The sin nature cannot be essential to humanity; otherwise you would have to say Adam and Eve prior to the Fall were not human beings because they didn't have a sin nature. That is preposterous. They were obviously human beings. So the sin nature is something that affects all people – it is universal – but it is not essential to humanity. Otherwise Adam and Eve were subhuman prior to the Fall.

Student: Correct me if I am mistaken but to say that Adam and Eve did not have the sin nature . . .

Dr. Craig: Prior to the Fall.

Student: . . . prior to the Fall. The basic comment by God was *don't eat of the fruit of that tree for in the day you do you will surely die*. That was argued by the enemy. But beyond that, up to that point in time when they actually ate of the fruit of the tree, I don't think they were human as we understand a human. They didn't have the capacity to die without eating of the fruit of the tree first. Did they?

Dr. Craig: Well, now, wait a minute. The capacity to die – mortality – is also surely not essential to being a human being. Otherwise the blessed in heaven are not human. That is surely not correct. We are not going to cease being human beings. You are associating sin and its effects as somehow essential to being a human being. That is not the biblical view. The biblical view is that man prior to the Fall was neither mortal nor sinful and that Jesus was neither sinful in his nature. The blessed in heaven are not going to be mortal, and I don't think they will have a sin nature either. The presence of a sin nature and corruption and so forth is universal but that is not the same as being essential. Let me just give an illustration if this isn't communicating. Prior to around 1968 it was universal among human beings that no one had walked on the surface of the moon. There was nobody who had the property – prior to 1968 – of having walked on the surface of the moon. Does that mean that that is an essential property to human beings? No. It was a universal property but not an essential property. Neil Armstrong and others flew to the moon and walked on the moon and had that property. Similarly, sin can be a universal property of human beings but it is not essential to us lest you deny the humanity of Adam and Eve and deny the humanity of Jesus and the blessed in heaven.⁵

Student: I do not deny the humanity of Jesus. I object to the use of the word “fully.” I prefer the word “truly.”

Dr. Craig: I've already responded to that. Let me just say I don't think you should use the word “fully” because that is misleading. What you should use is the word “truly” – he

⁵ 20:06

was truly God and truly man. But if you use the word “fully” that makes it sound like he was 100% man in which case he wasn't God. Or if he was 100% God, he wasn't man. The creeds that we've studied already in looking at the Trinity and the two natures of Christ was that Christ is *vere deus, vere homo* – he is truly God and truly man. He has all the essential properties of humanity and all the essential properties of deity. And that doesn't entail mortality and sin.

Student: I would support the last person.

Dr. Craig: Oh! Come on! You can't! You can't!

Student: I do not believe that Christ was 100% human.

Dr. Craig: No, I already spoke to that. But don't you think he was truly human?

Student: Two reasons. One: he did not have the capacity for sin. Two: he can look you in the eye and forgive your sins. No human can do that. So I don't believe he was 100% human.

Dr. Craig: Wait. Don't say 100%. That is just what I've spoken against.

Student: Nor is there a requirement in God's mind that I could find for him to be 100% human. Whatever percent human he was was adequate for him to save me and thank God for that. Can you show me a biblical passage . . .

Dr. Craig: Someone asked how do heretics understand the atonement – my Defenders class is full of heretics! *[laughter]*

Student: By that measure, I am a heretic. I would ask those who disagree to explain those two points – he did not have the capacity for sin and he had the ability to forgive sin. What human could do that?

Dr. Craig: He has that ability in virtue of being divine. He had two natures – one human and one divine. His ability to forgive sin, for example, is a property he has in virtue of his deity – in virtue of his divine nature. He has two natures. But we must not say that because he lacked capacities that a *merely* human being would have that therefore he wasn't truly human. A merely human being couldn't be omniscient, right? For example, a merely human being couldn't be omnipotent. But Christ could because he was truly God as well as truly man. If you deny the true humanity of Christ, you have to then go back to our discussion about Apollinarius and why the church fathers rejected this – if he hasn't truly taken our human nature then he hasn't redeemed human nature and his redemption and atonement is in vain.

Student: I won't object to “truly” because that is suitably vague, but I would have to reject to 100%.

Dr. Craig: No creed has affirmed 100%.

Student: John 14:12 says, “the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to my Father.” In our identification with Christ, how much of that greater work is a substitutional . . . taking up the burden for another . . . to what extent should that be drawn in our identification with Christ?

Dr. Craig: I feel absolutely certain that this passage read in context isn't referring to Christ's work of the atonement. When we talk about the person of Christ and the work of Christ and we speak of the atonement as Christ's work, this isn't biblical language. These are theological categories that are used to explain Scripture. When Christ is talking about his works, he is talking not about his substitutionary atonement. For example, he says in the previous verse, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me, or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves.” He is probably talking about the miraculous signs that he did.⁶ *If you don't believe me on my own word, believe me for the sake of these works which are signs of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God* – his healings and exorcisms, for example. It might be that he is talking here about miraculous works that people would do or maybe great works of evangelism in bringing people to a saving knowledge of God. But I feel confident that he is not suggesting that you and I will offer our lives as a substitutionary atonement for others – that we are going to have a greater sacrifice than him because his atonement is all-sufficient and final. Remember in the book of Hebrews it says it is once for all and therefore never need be repeated.

Student: Because love is actually defined by sacrifice, if we love we cannot escape making sacrifices. If you take away sacrifice then love is empty. So the work of God is to believe that he is sent by God. So there is a channel between man and God opened up by Jesus Christ, and we can, as Jacob's Ladder says, we can approach God through this ladder. If we have that channel of communication and know God's will . . . like all the missionary kind of understands, if you want to redeem a people group you have to make some kind of sacrifice to bring them back into Christ's salvation. I think Christ talking about the work is basically what the heavenly Father revealed to each individual – what he wants them to do and whether we submit to it or not. To some extent there definitely is a sacrifice, and to some extent there is some substitutional burden.

Dr. Craig: I want to affirm that, too. I think what you are saying is obviously correct even if it is not based on this verse. Paul says in his epistles, *Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ*. Paul talks about how in his ministry and suffering and persecution – language that I still can't understand – he says, *I am going to complete what is lacking in Christ's suffering by my own bodily suffering for the Gospel*. That certainly

is true even if it is not based on this verse – as agents of Christ and the Kingdom, we need to be involved in service for others and sacrifice that may entail suffering.

Student: To bring this conversation back to Earth, I mentioned to you an article this morning and I thought the class would like to get your reaction to it.

Dr. Craig: I thought that would have been more appropriately brought up when we were talking about heretics! *[laughter]*

Student: There was an article in the local paper about two weeks ago.⁷ I was astounded at what it said. There has been an Episcopal church in the Atlanta area for many years called the Episcopal Church of the Atonement. It is on High Point Road in Buckhead or Sandy Springs. Anyway, the church had dwindled in attendance so they brought in a team to troubleshoot, including a professor of church leadership from Candler School of Theology at Emory who is ordained as an Episcopal priest. The conclusion was they needed to rebrand the church or rename the church because the word “atonement” is offensive. Not just the word but the doctrine is offensive. I gave you the article. I was amazed at that, and would like to get your reaction.

Dr. Craig: I am anxious to read the article, but what you point out here is so typical of the old mainline denominations. They are embarrassed and offended at the doctrine of the atonement and therefore are quite willing to abandon it in the misguided belief that this is somehow going to increase church attendance by moving away from orthodoxy. In fact, it is going to have, I predict, exactly the opposite effect. It is the churches which have stayed true to biblical orthodoxy – biblical doctrine and preaching – that are the growing churches.⁸ It is the mainline, old denominations that increasingly depart from biblical Christianity that find themselves now bleeding members and declining in the rolls. The objection here to the atonement saying that it is a dark doctrine is that it smacks of child abuse – God is like a cosmic tyrant who abuses his Son Jesus. This is simply a caricature of not only the biblical doctrine of the atonement which says that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son but also, as we will see when we do our survey of church history, it is a caricature of traditional theories of the atonement that have been defended by theologians down through history. They always see the atonement as motivated by God's love; it is God's redeeming act which Christ voluntarily undertakes for the sake of our salvation. I think that it is a glorious doctrine, myself, motivated by the love of God and extolling God's holiness and goodness and therefore nothing to be ashamed of, much less to be abandoned.

Student: Many of the modern hymnals are now expunging all references to the blood and the atonement.

⁷ See <http://www.reporternewspapers.net/2017/04/01/easter-arrives-church-attempts-resurrection/> (accessed April 11, 2017).

⁸ 30:06

Dr. Craig: Is that true? I wasn't aware of that.

Student: Yes.

Dr. Craig: Many of these reservations about the atonement are going to be based upon objections that the doctrine is immoral or unjust. This is a serious, formidable objection that needs to be dealt with straight-forwardly. We are going to tackle that objection in this class and look at this challenge and see if this is, in fact, an immoral and unjust doctrine.

END DISCUSSION

Let me conclude this morning by saying a few words by way of introduction to our survey of different atonement theories that have been offered down through history.

We've seen that the church fathers, for the first several hundred years, were embroiled in disputes over the person of Christ. There were first the trinitarian controversies and then these were followed by the christological controversies as the doctrines of the Trinity and two natures of Christ were hammered out and articulated. Therefore the fathers had little time to devote to the discussion of what later theologians were to call the “work of Christ” (that is to say, his achieving atonement). As a result of this no ecumenical council ever pronounced on the subject of the atonement. This has left the church without conciliar guidance. There is no church council like we have with Nicaea or Chalcedon which has pronounced upon the doctrine of the atonement. That has left the church somewhat tetherless in its articulation and understanding of the atonement. When the church fathers did mention the subject of the atonement, their comments tended to be very brief and, frankly, for the most part unincisive. They did not have a profound grasp of the subject.

The church fathers thought of Christ's death as a sacrificial offering. Sometimes it was construed in terms of substitutionary punishment. Let me read for you a statement by the great church historian Eusebius from his treatise *Demonstration of the Gospel* (10.1).

This is what Eusebius wrote:

the Lamb of God . . . was chastised on our behalf, and suffered a penalty He did not owe, but which we owed because of the multitude of our sins; and so He became the cause of the forgiveness of our sins, because He received death for us, and transferred to Himself the scourging, the insults, and the dishonour, which were due to us, and drew down on Himself the apportioned curse, being made a curse for us. And what is that but the price of our souls?⁹ And so the oracle says in our person: 'By his stripes we were healed,' and 'The Lord delivered him for our sins'. . .

Similar sentiments were expressed by Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and others.

Notice that Eusebius sees Christ's vicarious punishment as the price paid for our salvation. He says, "What is that but the price of our souls?" In saying this he draws attention to the ransom which was paid as the price for our redemption. The church fathers tended to fasten upon this motif of ransom to the neglect of other New Testament motifs in their understanding of the doctrine of the atonement.

The next time that we meet we will talk about the church fathers' ransom theory or as it is sometimes called the Christus Victor theory.¹⁰

¹⁰ Total Running Time: 37:11 (Copyright © 2017 William Lane Craig)