

Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

15. Why Did Jesus Die On the Cross?

Re-examining what is meant by Salvation, Redemption, Sacrifice



Questions for Reflection

1. What did we need redeeming from?
2. Did God need Jesus' sacrifice on the cross?
3. If we were redeemed by the cross, why do we have to be baptised?
4. Once redeemed and baptised, why do we continue to sin?

committed sins as well. The only passage, therefore, that could be used to interpret Jesus' death as a sin offering is in Hebrews. But, Jesus was not a burnt offering. Also, the notion that a loving and just God could demand the death of His son as some kind of ransom or offering to appease Himself is frankly abhorrent, although understood as such by several eminent Church figures.

It is quite surprising that no explanation is made in the Church's documents to show precisely *how* Jesus' death is a sacrifice, although many individuals have tried to provide explanations in terms of 'sin' or 'atonement' offerings. Maybe Jesus death should be seen as a sacrifice in **another, different, more complex way.**

Jesus emphasised love, love of God and love of neighbour. He stated that:

'no greater love has any man than to lay down his life for a friend' (John ch.15).

Jesus death **was** a sacrifice but not in OT terms. It was a sacrifice on *his own terms* that show His love for us. Similarly, if we believe in God's eternal love, then that love can undo in an instant what a man like Adam initiated, without any kind of traditional sacrifice being required as a pre-condition. In this context, maybe God's plan of salvation was to free us from the deathly implications of both Original and deliberate sin by **His loving choice**, but presented through His son Jesus, in a way that would make us recognise, in the most powerful way possible, how repellent sin is, how much love God has, and how we should act. After all, because Jesus is also God how useful is it for us to see God make a sacrifice of himself to himself, even though this is generally expressed as a sacrifice to the Father? (and most theories of how Jesus' death is a sacrifice do not address this issue).

In humility, may I propose that Jesus' death should be seen as a *sign of the forgiveness of sins and as an exemplar, thanksgiving sacrifice:*

- Jesus died as a *sign* that our sins had been *forgiven* as a gratuitous act of the Father
- an *example* both of His love for us and for how we must behave
- the voluntary supreme *thanksgiving* to God for His merciful act in forgiving both Adam's sin and our transgressions
- the only true sacrifice, itself the *real definition of sacrifice*, against which all other sacrifices should be compared, not the other way round. It is the gift of life, where a person lays down his or her life to save, help and guide a friend

Also, the *Eucharistic*, the *Passion* and *Resurrection* must be recognised not as three events but one. All reveal our salvation. **First**, Jesus gives us an eternal meal of Himself to us - the Eucharist. **Second**, he becomes a voluntary Paschal victim to His Father and Our Father. **Third**, his Resurrection gives us a glimpse of the future life now open to us. The Easter event is really a new Exodus, a new Passover, one that not only frees us from sin but, in so doing, makes us able to fulfil our full potential as children of God, a potential denied us since Adam's sin.

Importantly, although the salvation now available is meant for all, it is **not applied automatically**. Where people have a choice, God wants them to accept Him freely and show this acceptance and love of Him formally, by being baptised and continuing to avoid sin and act in goodness.

Also, the Paschal event itself is inextricably joined to Pentecost. The *Holy Spirit* provides the tools for us to struggle successfully in the world as children of God and to help others. Baptism is like being born into a family, while Pentecost (the giving of the sacrament of Confirmation) is like being educated and prepared for an independent adult life and evangelisation in a hostile world.

Our salvation must, therefore, be seen as a **Trinitarian event** - the Father forgiving, the Son mediating, the Spirit invigorating.

Salvation and Redemption

Is there a difference between being 'saved' and being 'redeemed'? To help answer this question, it is best to try and understand, at least in summary, how these words were understood in the Bible.

Salvation and Redemption in the Old Testament

Remembering what was discussed previously, that for much of the OT there was not a spiritual attitude in the sense that we understand those words, the use of the word 'salvation' was restricted to a secular sense. It meant the provision of freedom and security, and deliverance of Israel from its enemies. There are literally hundreds of occasions when 'salvation' is used in this way, based on the Covenant promises of God.

After the exile, the notion of **salvation** adopts three aspects: salvation centred on the restoration of Israel's fortunes (Isaiah uses the word in this sense e.g. ch.46, 51, 52, and it came to be closely connected with Messianism); salvation now available to all nations (e.g. Isa. ch.45, 49 and 52), although here the precise nature of that salvation is not made clear; salvation focused on individuals, the righteous, (e.g. Ps 17, 35, 37), and especially the poor (e.g. Ps 69, 71, 109), protecting them from oppression.

In the OT, the Hebrew for **redemption** implies the payment of money, a ransom, in order to free an object or person from some obligation. The use of this literal definition can be seen in the redemption of the first-born from their commitment to Yahweh (Exodus ch.34). However, most of the time, the word is used in a metaphorical sense to mean setting someone free, as can be understood from the use of 'redeem' in the context of Yahweh freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (e.g. Deuteronomy ch.7 and 13, and Micah ch.6). After all, Yahweh as 'Goel' never actually paid any ransom to anyone. As such, there is little difference in meaning between salvation and redemption, as seen in Psalm 130 (the 'De Profundis') where the word redemption is used for 'release from sin', a concept implied in Hosea ch.13, where sin is called death.

Sacrifice in the Old Testament

A sacrifice is the giving of a victim to a God (e.g. Abraham and Isaac). Later, this act was deemed too special for ordinary people to make, and only intermediaries, called priests, could perform this function. Also, it was ritualised not only in the killing but also in the burning of the offering on an altar, either wholly burnt 'Olah' or partly burnt, and the blood sprinkled.

To help grasp how Jesus' death can be called a sacrifice, it is important to have an grasp of the relevant types of sacrifices made in the OT and the different words used to identify each type (see Leviticus ch.1 to 3):

- Communion or Peace sacrifice (selem) used to celebrate communal life and good relations with Yahweh e.g. at festivals
- Sin sacrifice (hattat) is only made after *inadvertent sin* (see also, Numbers ch.15).

It is important to note that there are several words for sin in the OT, sin being *anything* that offends God. However, sacrifice can only be made for **unintended** sin, not for sin committed deliberately ('with a high hand'). It is also important to notice that the original Passover was **not** a



sacrifice (Exodus ch.12) but a ritual meal eaten before the Exodus from Egypt, with the blood of the lamb acting as a *sign*, not a sacrifice. The use of the more general word for sacrifice 'zebah' at Exodus 12:27 and Deuteronomy 16:2, is in the context of a command to celebrate that event in the future by a family meal of *remembrance and thanksgiving*.



Salvation and Redemption in the New Testament

There is a significant contrast between the OT and the NT usage of salvation and redemption. In the NT the word for salvation (Greek Soteria) is used to mean salvation *from sin*, as it was in Psalm 130. It is a theme of Acts (e.g. ch.4) and most of the letters (e.g. Romans ch.1 and 13; Ephesians ch.1 and 6; Philippians ch.2). In the Gospels, Simeon uses the word to refer to Jesus (Luke ch.2), but Jesus is shown as using the word only twice, to Zacchaeus, the tax collector, for his repentance and generosity which grants him salvation (Luke ch.19), and with the Samaritan woman at the well, **'for salvation comes from the Jews'** (John ch.4).

However, the verb 'save' is used many times with the same meaning of 'saved from sin' e.g.

'who can be saved?' Matthew ch.19; to the prostitute **'your sins are forgiven ... your faith has saved you'** (Luke ch.7); **'God sent his son into the world so that through him it might be saved'** (John ch.3).

It is also used frequently in the context of Jesus' miracles, where 'saved' means made well again (e.g. Matthew ch.9, about the woman with a haemorrhage who touched Jesus' cloak).

The Greek word for redemption in the sense of giving of a ransom payment is 'lytron'. This word is used only twice in the Gospels, but both are in parallel passages in Matthew ch.20, and Mark ch.10. Here it appears out of context, in a passage about leaders having to act as servants, and may, therefore, only have the general meaning of saving others. Elsewhere 'lytron' is only used in 1 Timothy ch.2 and although the verb 'redeemed', taken from 'lytron', is found more frequently (e.g. 1 Peter ch.1, Hebrews ch.9) it, too, may be understood in a general way for 'saved' rather than with the literal sense of giving an actual ransom.

How Did Jesus' Death Save Us?

I felt it was important to look in some detail at how the words salvation, redemption and sacrifice were understood because Jesus' death is described in similar terms. You should note that there is little emphasis on Jesus' death as a sacrifice in the Gospels or the uncontested letters of St. Paul. (there is one sentence in Ephesians (ch.5). The letter to the Romans does contrast sin coming into the world with Adam with freedom from sin through Jesus (ch.5 f) but not in sacrificial terms. Only in Hebrews (ch.9 and 10) is the sacrificial character of Jesus' death described. There the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus are contrasted to that traditionally known in Judaism. Jesus is shown as both priest and victim and His death provides the blood required to ratify the New Covenant and at the same time atone for sin. However, Hebrews does not refer to Original Sin like St. Paul does, but rather directs itself to intentional sin, as it gives the view that subsequent deliberate sin is unforgivable (ch.10).

From what has been outlined previously, Jesus' death might fit into the OT category of a sin sacrifice to save us from the effects of Original sin, as our inheritance of that guilt could be argued to parallel the non-deliberate sin of the OT. But Jesus' death concerns deliberately