

Salvation Session 4 Images of the Atonement

Last week we looked at how Christ brought about our salvation. He substituted himself for us and died the death that our sins deserved. But what exactly did his sacrifice achieve? I like the way Packer puts it: “that Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgement for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption and glory.” We all have to realise that without the cross we were all going to fall under God’s terrible judgement.

In and through the cross, God has saved or rescued us, disclosed more of himself to us and overcome evil. The blessings of God saving us are richly diverse. Truly they’re beyond human understanding, but I’m just going to try and give us a better idea in terms of five images ‘propitiation’, ‘redemption’ ‘justification’, ‘reconciliation’ and ‘covenant’. If we try and combine these images together in our minds I believe they’ll give us a better idea of what our salvation is and means.

Propitiation

Propitiation was necessary because the sins of mankind aroused the wrath of God – and here we must remember that God’s anger is completely pure and predictable, never capricious or arbitrary or spiteful or vindictive. In pagan religions, it was humans who offered sacrifices, or otherwise appeased their primitive Gods. But, scripture states that there is nothing whatsoever that we can do to appease God’s anger. There is no possibility of bribing or cajoling God to forgive us, for we deserve nothing but his judgement. Nor did Christ by his sacrifice prevail on God to pardon us – no, God himself had taken the initiative in his sheer mercy and grace. God himself presented Jesus Christ as a propitiatory sacrifice: “God presented [Jesus Christ] as a [propitiatory sacrifice], through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—” (Romans 3:25 NIV)

It is not that we loved him, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a propitiation for our sins: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an [propitiatory] sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10 NIV)

God’s love is the source of the atonement not the result of it.

The propitiatory sacrifice was God himself (albeit in the person of his Son). In giving his Son, he was, in a sense, giving himself. Thus we can say that God did indeed need to be propitiated, that God himself in his holy love undertook to do the propitiating and God himself who in the person of his Son died for the propitiation of our sins. There is no crudity here to provoke ridicule, only profound holy love that should provoke our worship.

However, I do also believe that the concept of expiation is also of relevance. As Dr T Wells put it:

“In Pauline thought, man is alienated from God by sin and God is alienated from man by his wrath. It is in the substitutionary death of Christ that sin is overcome and wrath averted, so that God can look on man without displeasure and man can look on God without fear. Sin is expiated and God is propitiated.”

Redemption

Our image of salvation now changes from the religious ritual of propitiation to the market place. For, at its most basic, to 'redeem' means to buy back, whether as a purchase or as a ransom. Thus, this image speaks of our captivity in sin, which made a divine act of rescue necessary. Propitiation focussed on the wrath of God that was placated by the cross, redemption focuses on the plight of sinners from which they were ransomed by the cross. Ransom is certainly an appropriate term here. The Greek words *lytroo* (usually translated 'redeem') and *apolytrosis* (usually translated 'redemption') are derived from the Greek word *lytron*, which was a technical term in the ancient world for the purchase or release of a slave – which was often very costly.

In the OT, property, animals, persons and even nations could all be redeemed by the payment of a price. In Judaism, a 'kinsman redeemer' had the right, even the duty, to buy back property that had been alienated so that it might remain in a family or tribe. We see this in the role of Boaz with Ruth (in Ruth 3 and 4) and of Jeremiah over land:

"Jeremiah said, "The word of the LORD came to me: Hanamel son of Shallum your uncle is going to come to you and say, 'Buy my field at Anathoth, because as nearest relative it is your right and duty to buy it.' "Then, just as the LORD had said, my cousin Hanamel came to me in the courtyard of the guard and said, 'Buy my field at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. Since it is your right to redeem it and possess it, buy it for yourself.' "I knew that this was the word of the LORD; so I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel and weighed out for him seventeen shekels of silver. I signed and sealed the deed, had it witnessed, and weighed out the silver on the scales." (Jeremiah 32:6-10 NIV)

With animals, all firstborn males of all livestock belonged by right to Yahweh, although donkeys and other unclean animals could be redeemed or bought back by the owner (Exodus 13:13; 34:20). Individual Israelites, each had to pay a ransom for their lives at the time of the national census:

"Then the LORD said to Moses, "When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the LORD a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them. Each one who crosses over to those already counted is to give a half shekel, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. This half shekel is an offering to the LORD. All who cross over, those twenty years old or more, are to give an offering to the LORD. The rich are not to give more than a half shekel and the poor are not to give less when you make the offering to the LORD to atone for your lives. Receive the atonement money from the Israelites and use it for the service of the Tent of Meeting. It will be a memorial for the Israelites before the LORD, making atonement for your lives." (Exodus 30:11-16 NIV)

Firstborn sons had belonged to God since the first Passover, and also had to be redeemed by their parents. An impoverished Israelite compelled to sell himself into slavery could also redeem himself or be redeemed by a relative:

""If an alien or a temporary resident among you becomes rich and one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells himself to the alien living among you or to a member of the alien's clan, he retains the right of redemption after he has sold himself. One of his relatives may redeem him: An uncle or a cousin or any blood-relative in his clan may redeem him. Or if he prospers, he may redeem himself. He and his buyer are to count the time from the year he sold himself up to the Year of Jubilee. The price for his release is to be based on the rate paid to a hired man for that number of years. If many years remain, he must pay for his

redemption a larger share of the price paid for him. If only a few years remain until the Year of Jubilee, he is to compute that and pay for his redemption accordingly. He is to be treated as a man hired from year to year; you must see to it that his owner does not rule over him ruthlessly. "Even if he is not redeemed in any of these ways, he and his children are to be released in the Year of Jubilee, for the Israelites belong to me as servants. They are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 25:47-55 NIV)

As regards nations, scripture uses the vocabulary of redemption to describe Yahweh's release of Israel both from slavery in Egypt (e.g. Exodus 6:6; Deuteronomy 7:8; 15:15 etc) and from exile in Babylon (e.g. Isaiah 43:1-4; 48:20 etc). In all these cases, redemption involved a costly intervention. As B B Warfield says "... a redemption without a price paid is as anomalous a transaction as a sale without money passing."

In the NT, the concept is still that those needing redemption are in a bad situation and can be released only by the payment of a price. But, now the plight is moral rather than material, and the price was the atoning death of God's Son. This is made evident from Jesus' words in Mark 10:45:

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

A similar expression occurs in 1 Timothy 2:

"For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time." (1 Timothy 2:5-6 NIV)

Here the imagery implies that we were held in captivity from which only the payment of a ransom can free us and that the ransom price is the life of the Messiah. Our lives are forfeit; Christ's life will be sacrificed instead. This clearly implies the concept of substitution – the substitution of Christ for each and every one of us – which we looked at last week.

What then was the moral bondage from which we could not rescue ourselves and from which Christ has ransomed us? Firstly, it's our transgressions or sins since redemption is made synonymous with the forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14), secondly, it is the divine judgement or 'curse of the law pronounced on lawbreakers' (Galatians 3:13; 4:5), and thirdly, it is 'all wickedness' (Titus 2:14).

More than that we shall eventually be released from *all* the ravages of the Fall – although we have not yet fully experienced this and we will not do so until the second coming of Christ. At that point, the whole groaning creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay, and be brought to share in the glory of God's children. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit is himself the seal, the guarantee and the first-fruits of our final redemption (Romans 8:18-30; Ephesians 1:14; 4:30).

"who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory." (Ephesians 1:14 NIV)

and

"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." (Ephesians 4:30 NIV)

As we have said, the price of our redemption was Christ's death. Nothing less could suffice, the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins (Hebrews 10:4). Christ paid the price of our ransom in the incarnation where he set aside his majesty and took on all the limitations of humanity and on the cross he gave of his life. Because Christ has bought us with his blood

– that is with his life – we belong to him and that should motivate us as individual Christians to holiness. As Paul says “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.”:

“Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:18-20 NIV)
In fact, in a recapitulation of the Trinity, we could say that we belong to God three times over. Firstly, because he created us, secondly, because he redeemed us, and thirdly, because he, through his spirit, indwells us. Bought by Christ, we have no right to become the slaves of anyone or anything else, we are Christ’s slaves and in His service is true freedom.

Justification

This image of salvation is derived from the law court. Justification is the opposite of condemnation and both are verdicts of the judge over the accused when he pronounces guilt or innocence. Ages ago in a speech to Job, Bildad posed the crucial question:

“How then can a man be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure.” (Job 25:4).

Some scholars have asserted that justification is simply forgiveness, nothing but forgiveness. However, I contend that the concepts are complimentary but not identical. Forgiveness cancels our liability to punishment for sin; but justification bestows on us a righteous standing before God, which goes further than mere forgiveness.

The idea of justification by faith was of course the key biblical idea rediscovered by the sixteenth century church reformers. It is still a key concept today. A group of modern Anglican evangelicals wrote:

“Justification by Faith appears to us, as it does to all evangelicals, to be the heart and hub, the paradigm and essence, of the whole economy of God’s saving grace. Like Atlas, it bears a world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of God’s love in Christ towards sinners.”

Some Christians object to any projection of God as judge and king and not as Father, but the juridical flavour of the justification image is well balanced by other images of salvation – such as reconciliation. Others have objected to the image as a particular invention of Paul. This latter criticism is not sustainable as the idea of justification before God goes back to Jesus who said that the tax collector who prayed sincerely ‘went home justified before God’ rather than the self righteous Pharisee:

“The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ ”But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ ”I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:11-14 NIV)

Indeed the notion goes back to the book of Isaiah in the OT:

“After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:11 NIV)

Now we’re given a righteous standing before God the moment we turn to Christ in faith, but we’re not immediately made really actually righteous. That’s why we need the image of

justification. Our justification is a once and for all judicial act of God declaring us righteous, it does not relate to God infusing righteousness into us or making us experientially holy. However, sanctification (God making us righteous through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit), though begun from the moment we are justified, is gradual and incomplete throughout our life here on earth, as we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ with ever increasing glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). This is why many of the greatest figures in scripture, such as Abraham and David were beset with weakness and uncleanness.

We are justified not by works but by grace, not by law but through faith, not by our righteous deeds but God's mercy.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no-one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9);

and

“know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified.” (Galatians 2:16);

and

“he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,” (Titus 3:5).

Here we do not co-operate with salvation – we can only accept it or reject it – but accept it or reject it we must, remember my George Wilson story. Moreover the faith which justifies us is not a work of ours, our faith would have no value were it not for Christ's sacrifice. The value is not in the faith but in the object of that faith – Christ. Salvation is not by works but into works.

But, if our sanctification is never completed in this life, how can we be justified by a righteous God when we have not yet been made completely righteous? This is a difficult question. Some speak of us ‘putting on Christ's righteousness’, as if it were a cloak that would hide our sinful nature from God – but this is not a clear picture of what is taking place here. It is rather that Christ's righteousness is imputed or credited to us, just as righteousness had been imputed to Abraham – ‘Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.’ (Genesis 15:6). Phineas was another one to whom righteousness was imputed – ‘Phineas stood up and intervened, and the plague was checked. This was credited to him as righteousness for endless generations to come.’ (Psalm 106:30-31). This presents a problem to most people today because we are firmly of the belief that righteousness is a purely ethical quality. But I believe that from God's viewpoint righteousness is basically a legal concept of ‘right standing’. Clearly, a ‘standing’ can be conferred on someone regardless of his personal qualities and thus I believe that in God's terms Christ's righteousness can be credited or imputed to us.

Remember also that we are justified *in* Christ. We are justified *through* Christ's sacrifice, but also *in* our personal relationship with him. That means that our justification is linked to our union with Christ and all the benefits that brings. As Tom Wright says, “justification is not an individualist's charter, but God's declaration that we belong to the covenant community.” This community is called to good works (Titus 2:14; 3:8), so there is no real conflict between Paul's emphasis on justification by faith, a faith that produces good works, and James' emphasis on good works that issue from faith (James 2:14-26).

Thus, I hope you will see that justification does not involve God pretending that we have been made righteous. God has declared us legally righteous, conferred the standing of

righteousness upon us, because in faith we have accepted the grace of the benefits of Christ's sacrificial death. Some people dislike this emphasis on God as a God of legality and law, but I believe this is a mistaken view of our God. The whole of the OT is strongly concerned with a legal relationship between God and his chosen people and the laws he gave them to obey, indeed the Hebrew word for the first five books of the Bible *torah* means 'law'. Not only does God promulgate strict moral laws, but also the whole universe is based on rules or laws – that is why we humans have been able to develop science. Whether we like it or not, our God is a God of law.

In any event, whatever the exact mechanism, we can be completely confident from scripture that through faith in Christ God *does* consider us to be righteous, and I submit that God's view is the only opinion which matters.

Reconciliation

This reconciliation begins with our reconciliation with God as he has redeemed us and justified us because of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice and continues with our membership of a reconciled community of Christ.

Reconciliation with God is the beginning, it well expresses the at-one-ment of the atonement, in which God and human beings come back together after having been alienated for so long. In fact, the word reconciliation only occurs four times in the NIV translation of the Bible. It is significant that in Romans 5:9-11, which is one of the great passages on reconciliation in the NT, to be reconciled and to be justified are parallels:

“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” (Romans 5:9-11).

Reconciliation and justification, although both effected by the cross, are not identical. Justification is our legal standing before God as our judge; reconciliation is our personal standing with our Father in His kingdom. When we are justified, we have peace with God, which is reconciliation (Romans 5:1)

Two other NT terms also confirm the fact that we are at peace with God, namely 'adoption' and 'access'. As regards adoption, Jesus himself gave us permission to approach God as Abba, Father and Paul takes this up emphasising the privileges we have in being sons instead of slaves, and therefore God's heirs as well:

“because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” (Romans 8:14-17 NIV)

and

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:26-29 NIV)

and

“What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.” (Galatians 4:1-7 NIV)

Access gives us active communion with God, especially in prayer. Twice Paul brings together ‘access to God’ and ‘peace with God’ (Romans 5:1-2; Ephesians 2:17-18). The writer to the Hebrews borrows from the Day of Atonement ritual in order to convey the closeness we can now have to God:

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Thus reconciliation, peace with God, adoption into His family and access into His presence all bear witness to the same new relationship with him into which God has brought us. Reconciliation also has a horizontal as well as a vertical aspect, for God has reconciled us to one another as well as to him. This is made clear by Ephesians 2:11-22 that focuses particularly on the healing of the breach between Jews and Gentiles. He reminds his gentile Christian leaders that formerly they were both excluded from citizenship in Israel and alienated from God – but that they have now been brought near to God and near to Israel.

Jesus taught that:

““Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23-24 NIV)

It is impossible to enter into the reconciliation that Christ died to accomplish and at the same time to nourish grudges against our fellow human beings. That is why we offer one another a sign of peace just before the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer in the service of Holy Communion.

I'd like to look at reconciliation in more detail, especially the roles of God Christ and ourselves – based mainly but not exclusively on 2 Corinthians, but we just don't have time this morning.

Covenant

Now we come to our last image – covenant.

On the last night of Jesus's pre-resurrection life, he was in the upper room with the disciples. Paul says:

“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took

the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-25 NIV)

This was, of course, the institution of the Holy Eucharist.

Here Jesus explicitly stated that he was making a new covenant in his blood – which as we have seen, means that he was making a new covenant in his sacrificial death.

God made a number of covenants with mankind. Generally these didn't impose obligations on mankind, but the Sinai covenant was different. The Israelites promised to keep to the terms and conditions of this covenant, as a people, in return for God's blessing on them as a people – but under threat of God's curse if they didn't keep the covenant. This covenant largely defined the Jewish nation and was fundamentally important to their identity.

Nevertheless, they manifestly failed to keep its terms and conditions. God forgave them time and time again, but their sin and rebellion continued and eventually God sent the Israelites into exile as a punishment. It was a hopeless situation, yet God was a covenant-keeping God. He said 'I will never break my covenant with you' (Judges 2:1). So what could be done? God promised a radical solution in the form of a completely new covenant through the prophet Jeremiah:

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Although this passage is by far the most important OT reference to a new covenant, it is by no means the only one. Ezekiel also looks forward to an everlasting covenant of peace (Ezekiel 16:60; 37:26; 34:25; 37:26) whilst Isaiah says that the Servant will be 'a covenant for the people and a light to the Gentiles' (Isaiah 42:6) and that it will be everlasting (Isaiah 55:3; 61:8).

So when Jesus spoke of the new covenant he is linking his death to the forgiveness it will bring to believers and the new covenant to which the OT writers looked forward. We have seen how important the Sinai covenant was to the Israelite nation in the OT, thus to speak of replacing it with something new is an enormous change. Indeed. The cross of Christ IS radical – it transforms everything. The law and the OT sacrifices melt away before God's grace.

The new covenant is not brought about by keeping the law and the law, although it surely fulfilled the purposes of God in its time, was unable to bring salvation (see Galatians 3). That is the purpose of the new covenant. The covenant with Abraham was different from the Sinai covenant, because it did not involve the keeping of terms and conditions by mankind, and Paul argues strongly that the original Abrahamic covenant is still in full force (again see Galatians 3).

The writer to the Hebrews is especially fond of the idea of Christ's saving work as a covenant. He uses the word covenant 17 times, whilst the rest of the NT has only 16 uses of it. He assures us that the new covenant is a better covenant:

"The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest for ever.'" Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant." (Hebrews 7:18-22 NIV)

and this covenant is founded on better promises:

"But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises." (Heb 8:6 NIV)

Paul also argues that the new covenant is superior, because it gives life where the old covenant brought death (2 Corinthians 3:6). Hebrews also makes the point that Christ's sacrifice was necessary for forgiveness of sins committed under the old covenant (Hebrews 9:15).

To see the death of Jesus as a new covenant, then, is to see it as a radical reshaping of religion and our relations with God. It is the offering of the sacrifice of Christ's death that not only establishes the new covenant, but does so by taking away sin. Matthew makes this quite clear:

"This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:28).

This being so there was no need for the regulations of the law. The way to God was now seen to be through Christ and through him alone:

"Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12).

As Paul says this gives us a new freedom. We can approach God boldly in the name of Christ. All else falls away. Nothing else matters.

The image of salvation as covenant also makes it clear why we need to accept Christ's sacrifice in faith, just as Abraham had faith. Without faith, we are not members of the new covenant.

The Eucharist is a constant reminder of the new covenant:

"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The Lord's death is central. It is by that death alone that our sins are put away and we are brought into the new covenant relationship with God. This is God's final, eternal way. There is no means of improving on this new eternal covenant; our task is to live in a manner befitting that covenant.