To Whom Was the Ransom Price Paid?

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In the context of teaching the apostles that servant leadership should be practiced among the followers of Jesus, our Lord reminded them of the cru/x of his reason for coming to earth: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28). Jesus described his death on the cross as a "ransom" (LXX ton), which means the "price of release" (Walter Bauer, ed., by Frederick William Danker, Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament, 3rd edition, 2000, p. 605). Paul used a similar word, antiltron, in writing to Timothy: "For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and mankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5). The apostle Peter affirmed the "ransom" idea in his first epistle: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish" (1 Pet. 1:18-19). Peter used the verb "ransomed" (LXX ton), which means "to free by paying a ransom, redeem" or "to liberate from an oppressive situation, set free, rescue" (Ibid., p. 606). The apostle Paul used the same verb in writing to Titus: "He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (Tit. 2:14). Finally, the ransom idea is further illuminated by Paul's imagery of Christians being bought with a price: "For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20).

The question is often raised, "To whom was the ransom price paid?" And even though it is never sug-

gested in the New Testament, the answer is often given, "The ransom must have been paid to Satan." Scenes of God negotiating with the devil are imagined, but this "solution" raises serious complications. Did the almighty, sovereign God really have to go, hat in hand, to Satan in order to strike a bargain with him to save mankind? Sometimes the response has been that God was merely tricking Satan and giving him a dose of his own medicine. The arch deceiver was being deceived, because on the first day of the week, Christ was raised from the dead. But this flawed explanation creates more problems than it solves. It compromises the faultless integrity and perfect goodness of God who is trustworthy, blameless, and faithful. Furthermore, did the omnipotent God have to negotiate with a terrorist and pay a ransom in order to save mankind?

By speaking of his death as a ransom, our Lord meant that there would be some sort of benefit for others by his going to the cross. In the ancient world the idea of ransom was well known. Sometimes a ransom was paid for a captured soldier's release or a redemption price was paid to give freedom to a slave. In the Old Testament, the deliverance of the Israelites out of the bondage of Egypt and the return of the exiles in Isaiah were associated with a ransom or a redemption (Deut. 7:8; Isa. 52:10). In both passages, the emphasis is on the saving activity of God (Robert W. Lyon, Ransom, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 2nd edition, p. 983). A study of the Greek word group of "ransom" led Adela Yarbrough Collins to the conclusion that these words were also used in ancient Greek to refer to "transactions between human beings and gods in which sins were forgiven and offenses expiated." So Greek speaking people reading the New Testament might understand Mark 10:45 to mean that it was a "metaphorical way" of describing the death of Jesus as "a ritual expiation of the offenses of many." For example, "The 'many' could be those enslaved to God because of their offenses. The death of Jesus could then be interpreted as an act that won God's favor for the many by compensating for those offenses" (The Signification of Mark 10:45 Among Gentile Christians, Harvard Theological Review 90, no. 4 [October 1997]: 381-382).

Why is the ransom not paid to Satan? Mankind is in bondage to sin. The wages of sin is death, and Satan can provide no help with our problem. He is under the same condemnation (Matt. 25:41; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; Rev. 20:1-4). And against whom have we all sinned? Is it not God? David rightly declared, "Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight" (Psa. 51:4). We are unable to stand for our own sin. We are unable to redeem ourselves. But a ransom payment could be made by another person. William Barclay explains that in the Greek Old Testament, the "ransom" could "be paid by the man himself, or it may be paid by someone for him; but always it is a price and a payment which release him from a debt and a liability which otherwise he would have been bound to satisfy." (New Testament Words, p. 190). As Paul wrote, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). Christ is a "sacrifice of atonement" (propitiation, expiation; Rom. 3:24-25) for us by which we are justified and redeemed.

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“We are no longer obligated to pay the penalty for sin, because Christ has paid it for us. This answers the question of to whom Christ gave himself as a ransom (Matt. 20:28): the ransom was paid to God himself...God is the one who demands the penalty be paid; Jesus pays it for us. In this way redemption is seen to be practically identical with propitiation, as we would expect from the way they are paralleled in Romans 3:24-25” (Jack Cottrell, *God the Redeemer*, p. 440).

F. Büchsel writes in a similar vein: “What has been said leaves us in no doubt but that God is the recipient of the ransom. Jesus serves God when He dies, and God inexorably demands suffering from His Son. God smites Him. All possibility that Satan might receive the ransom is thus ruled out. Satan does not figure at all in the passion story in Mark and Matthew. Satan desires the death of Jesus so little that He tries to divert Him from this path, Mk. 8:33; Mt. 16:23” (“lutron,” *TWNT*, IV, p. 344).

Satan’s rebellion against God and his role as a tempter of mankind are not and never have been the keys to salvation history. They are minor sub-plots at best. The death of our Lord was in the plan of God long before it occurred as he, seated on his throne, has calmly and regally been in control. Peter clarified this point, saying that Jesus was “handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23; cf. 1 Pet. 1:18-20). Many Bible scholars are of the opinion that Jesus was thinking of the prophetic foreshadowing of his death in Isaiah 53 when he said that he “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28). Why? Because the servant in Isaiah 53 also suffered for “many,” bearing their sins so that they could be accounted righteous (Isa. 53:11-12). Also, just as Jesus “gave his life,” likewise the servant “poured out his soul to death” (Isa. 53:12). Vincent Taylor concluded:

“Jesus died to fulfil the Servant’s destiny and His service is that of vicarious and representative suffering” (*The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 2nd edition, p. 446).

In conclusion, God is all-powerful. Yes, we should beware of the devil as an adversary (1 Pet. 5:8; 2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:11). But, again, God is almighty. “For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back? (Isa. 14:27). “There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me” (Isa. 45:21). “I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved...there is no one who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it?” (Isa. 43:11-13). God did not need to negotiate with one of his creatures—a fallen, rebellious one at that—to accomplish the redemption of the human race. Therefore, the church confesses: “Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 24-25).

Every worthy interest centers in Christ. You cannot go wrong in Him. He was humble. He was contrite in spirit. He was sinless. He was perfect. He is our pattern of life every step of the way. Centuries ago He was born contrary to the laws of life. He lived in poverty and was reared in obscurity. One time was He over the border line of His own country, as an exiled child. He had no wealth of material sort and no relatives that cared much, and no formal education. In youth He puzzled kings and doctors; in manhood He ruled the course of nature, walked upon the billows and hushed them to peaceful calm. He healed and fed multitudes with no medicine except His divine touch, and made no charges for His great services. He never wrote a book nor a song; and yet, all worthy books and songs center in Him. He founded no schools; yet, all schools could never match His knowledge and wisdom. More Christian soldiers follow Christ to capture evil forces without firing a gun, than all other armies combined. He is balm of Gilead that heals every weary mind and gives rest to every tired soul who obeys Him (Jno. 14:1-7; Matt. 11:28-30; Heb. 5:8, 9). His name is the greatest in all the earth and heaven, and He is our living, loving Savior.

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