Are We Saved by Paying a Price to God?

By Mark F. Fischer, St. John's Seminary, Camarillo

The University Series, Monday, April 8, 2019, 7:30-9:00 PM

Our Lady of the Assumption Church, Ventura, California

In the Nicene Creed we affirm that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, crucified "for our sake" and "for our salvation." He died to set us free. Every Christian makes this profession. Christ's death was "for us," for our very well-being and freedom. Indeed, the Church teaches that the death of Christ is the "cause" of salvation. It is a fundamental truth of Christian life.

The mystery by which the death of Christ saves us, however, is hard to grasp. It can be rightly and wrongly understood. My goal is to shed some light on this basic Christian truth. By illuminating the mystery, we can better appreciate our faith and the marvelous relationship between humanity and divinity that is ours.

We do not want to misinterpret the death of Christ. We do not want to see it as the payment of a bribe to the Father for which God relents from punishing us. Nor do we want to view redemption in Christ as something that has an effect only for those who grasp it in faith. No, we want to affirm the means by which God's Word impels us to transcend what we were. In that sense we are correct to say that Jesus redeemed us. We must hear his voice and obey it.

To pursue this question, I will first distinguish between the sacrificial death of Christ and the false notion that Jesus paid off and appeased an angry God. After that, we will consider the Church's teaching about the objective nature of redemption. This is the teaching that we were redeemed by the one action of Christ, an action with consequences for all creation. The objective nature of redemption, we will see, is independent of and prior to faith. Our faith, by contrast, is the subjective nature of redemption. Then I will ask you to weigh in. I will ask you about the relation between God's action and our response. So let us begin by considering the death of Jesus as the cause of salvation.

Jesus' Death as a Ransom

How does the death of Christ save us? The Church makes this affirmation: "Christ, by his sacrifice on the cross, has ransomed us and reconciled us with God."[1] The word "ransom" comes from the Bible. Jesus told his followers not to lord it over one another, but to put themselves in a posture of service.

"The Son of man," said Jesus, "came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45//Mt. 20:28). The word ransom (*lútron*) does not mean what it does today, the payment of money for the release of kidnap victims. No, it

[1] This is the formulation of Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (German edition, 1952), edited in English by James Canon Bastible, translated from the German in 1955 by Patrick Lynch, fourth edition (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc. 1960). Ott (p. 185) attributes this to the Council of Trent and affirms it as a "De Fide" statement, the highest rank in the hierarchy of truths.

is a more general term, a means of release or liberation. The Son of man gives his life for our freedom.

The problem of understanding the death of Jesus as a "ransom" first came to my attention in the late 1970s, when I was a student at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. At the time I was fortunate to meet John T. Noonan, Jr., who was Professor of Law at the University of California. In 1985 Professor Noonan was nominated by President Reagan to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. He served until his death in 2017. When I knew Professor Noonan, he had formed a Catholic society at the university called "The More-Maritain Institute" after St. Thomas More and Jacques Maritain. He would convene us regularly to hear invited lecturers.

One day I was walking with Professor Noonan, and he raised the question of Jesus' death as a "ransom for many." Out of nowhere (it seemed) he asked whether theologians would consider the death of Jesus as a "bribe" to God the Father. His question stumped me. I had never even considered applying the word "bribe" to the death of Jesus. I simply told him that the concept seemed fundamentally wrong. Later I discovered that Professor Noonan was writing a book that he published in 1984 with the title *Bribes*.[2] Bribery is, of course, the bestowal or promise of money or favor to a person in a position of trust. The aim is to pervert and corrupt that person's judgment and conduct. Professor Noonan was writing a history of bribery and wanted to know whether the "ransom" of Jesus' death could be seen as a bribe.

What distinguishes the ransom of Jesus' death from a bribe is, first of all, the motive. No Christian would say that Jesus died so as to corrupt or pervert the judgment of his heavenly Father. We can reject that possibility. But the Church teaches that Jesus, by his death on the cross, offers reparation or satisfaction for human sinfulness.[3] That is what Professor Noonan was getting at. Human beings are guilty of offending God, and no merely human effort can remove that guilt. Only a divine person can render satisfaction. Noonan had an excellent question. Could the death of Jesus – understood as an offer to God to avoid the punishment rightly due to human sin – be considered a bribe?

Today I would say that such a misunderstanding can arise when we regard the crucifixion of Jesus as the "exclusive" moment of salvation, apart from the context of his entire life. Certain biblical passages so exalt the death of Jesus that the rest of his life pales in comparison. Think, for example, of St. Paul's testimony. "We preach Christ crucified," said Paul, as "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1. Cor. 1:23-24). For Paul, the crucifixion was central. But no Christian would say that Jesus showed

---

[2] John T. Noonan, Jr., *Bribes: The Intellectual History of a Moral Idea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[3] In the "Decree on Justification" (1547), the Council of Trent said: "The meritorious cause (of justification) is the beloved only-begotten Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ who . . . merited for us justification by His most holy passion on the wood of the cross and made satisfaction for us to God the Father." J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, Editors, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, revised edition (New York: Alba House, 1982), no. 647 (p. 178) [= Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, no. 1529].

divine power and wisdom only during his passion. Instead we would affirm that the incarnation, and the entire life of Christ that followed, are redemptive.[4]

The question of bribery might arise if we were to remove the crucifixion from its context in the incarnation. Removed from that context, Jesus' death would then be a single act, conceived as the payment of a ransom. Some medieval theologians, notably St. Anselm, argued such a point. Viewing the crucifixion that way, we might overlook its connection to the rest of Jesus' life. But that would be a mistake. The cross belongs to the incarnation. The death of Jesus was the culmination of his life-long practice of love and obedience. Yes, the Church affirms that the cross is the "cause" of salvation. No one would say that Jesus was merely "capable" of redeeming human beings until he performed the required action of dying on the cross. No, we say that the moment of his death was connected to what came before. We are saved by the cross as the conclusion to a 33-year life. His entire life had saving power.

We are now in a better position to understand why the death of Jesus, considered as a "ransom," differs from a bribe. The crucifixion ransomed us in that it was a means of release or liberation. The moment of Jesus' death was not an isolated payment of a price demanded by an angry God. It was rather the crowning moment of an entirely self-sacrificing life. The ransom of Jesus was not meant to change the mind of God. God had already chosen to save human beings, and the incarnation of the Son was God's own initiative – the initiative by which God united the divine and human natures.

The Objective Nature of Redemption

That Jesus gave his life as a ransom illustrates an important aspect of redemption, namely, its objective nature. We think of redemption as an action with a result. The action, as traditional theology reminds us, was the "act of redemption." The result was "the objective fact of being redeemed."[5] Redemption takes place, in short, at a historical moment. That's why the Church teaches that the death of Jesus is the cause of salvation. Being saved is God's initiative. Salvation does not belong to us as a human right.

The problem with the objective nature of redemption is that it may seem to imply that we have no responsibility for our own salvation. St. Paul wrote that, "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10). God reconciled us while we were still hostile. Instead of condemning us, however, God chose to become one of us. We did not initiate it – God did.

Steven Spielberg's 1982 film *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial* can illustrate the notion of an objective redemption. Critics have drawn a parallel between the movie and the

[4] In an "exclusive" satisfaction theory, "The incarnation no longer appears as an intrinsic constituent of the redemptive event itself." Karl Rahner, "Salvation," Part IV "Theology," in Karl Rahner, Editor, *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, John Cumming, Executive Editor for the English edition, translated by John Griffiths, Francis McDonagh, and David Smith (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975): 1519-1530, p. 1522 cited here.

[5] Rahner, "Salvation," Part IV "Theology," in Rahner (Ed.), *Sacramentum Mundi*, p. 1520.

gospel.[6] For those who don't know it, let me summarize the plot. *E.T.* depicts a single-parent family in which a recently-divorced mother is struggling to care for three children. The middle child, 10-year-old Elliott, feels put-down by his older brother. One night he discovers in his back yard a friendly alien who has been accidentally left behind on earth. A connection develops between E.T. and the boy. As E.T.'s health declines, Elliott helps him build a transmitter to "phone home." On Halloween he spirits the alien out of the house to the forest where E.T. spends the night trying to contact his colleagues. Elliott falls asleep during the vigil. In the morning he is alone and feeling ill. His brother finds E.T. and brings the dying alien home. Scientists hospitalize E.T. and Elliott. The connection between the two disappears and E.T. seems to die while Elliott recovers. But when E.T. reanimates, Elliott helps him escape and elude capture. E.T. promises to return just as a spaceship lands to take him home.

That's the plot in a nutshell. Commentators who see a connection between E.T. and the gospel point to the fact that the alien's arrival, like the incarnation of the Son, is a surprise from afar. E.T. has marvelous powers akin to the miracles of Jesus. He is not "of this world" and must return to his own realm. E.T. dies and rises, giving Elliott, his family and friends, a foretaste of true freedom. I could note many other parallels between E.T. and Jesus, but you get the idea.

The film *E.T.* captures part of what we mean when we call redemption objective. It depicts an event with a result. An alien arrives from space, transforms a boy, and returns. Elliott was not expecting a space creature, but it met him in his own backyard. E.T. and the boy experienced a connection, and the two grew to love one another. At the end of the film, as E.T. is about to depart, he touches Elliott's head and says, "I'll be right here." Elliott is changed by his encounter with E.T. That is the story's "objective nature." An action by E.T had its result in Elliott.

Redemption's Universal Consequence

There is more to the objective nature of redemption, however, than being an event in history. Redemption is an event with a universal result. Unlike the story of E.T., in which the alien transforms Elliott and the few who befriend him, redemption in Jesus Christ has consequences for all human history. St. Paul spoke of Christ as the "New Adam." The Old Adam – the first human being – brought sin into the world. The New Adam has re-established the human race on a new basis. That is what makes redemption objective. God willed to save us before we knew that we needed God.

To grasp the meaning of this, we have to go back to the Church Fathers. The topic was discussed by St. Irenaeus of Lyons at the end of the second century. About Jesus Christ, Irenaeus wrote, "He became what we are, to enable us to become what he is."[7] God became what we are when the Word became flesh. We become what he is

[6] The Wikipedia article on "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" cites three publications about the connection between E.T. and the gospel written by Stanley Kauffmann (1982), Nigel Andrews (1982), and Anton Karl Kozlovic (2004).

[7] Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Book V, Preface, cited in J.N.D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (1960), revised edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 172. The full citation: "For it is thus that thou wilt both controvert them [the heretics] in a legitimate manner, and wilt be prepared to receive the proofs brought forward against them, casting away their doctrines as filth by means of the celestial faith; but

when God's Word transforms us. Redemption is objective, not just because it was an event in history, but because it has consequences for all history. These consequences are real, even apart from our subjective acknowledgement of them.

Let me explain this by reference to the story of E.T. The film depicted an objective event. The alien came to earth and met Elliott. As an event, the story has a certain objectivity. But *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* never hints at a universal transformation. E.T. does not change the world. To be sure, he changed the life of Elliott. But the film did not transform the lives of the scientists who wanted to experiment on the alien, or the lives of the police officers who wanted to capture him. Instead, the film emphasized the subjectivity of Elliott. He and a small number of his friends and family were touched by the alien. The encounter with E.T. was an "objective" event but not a "universal" one.

This brings us back to the problem we noticed earlier, the problem of our responsibility for human salvation. God took the initiative to save us (as St. Paul said), "while we were enemies." Salvation is not our doing. It is an act of God, because "God so loved the world." Redemption is "objective" because it is an act with a result. That is one aspect of its objectivity. But the second aspect is equally important. I mean its universal nature. We Christians say that Jesus Christ is the redeemer of the world. The redemption has consequences for all creation and all human history. God did not act merely for those who believe. All things, we say, are made new in Christ. Redemption is objective in that God's action had a universal result, even apart from our response.

Question: Objective Redemption and Our Subjective Response

Let's review our progress so far and prepare ourselves for a discussion. We started with the fundamental Christian affirmation that we are saved because Christ died for us. Jesus gave his life as a ransom. But a ransom differs, as we saw, from a bribe. A bribe is paid to pervert the judgment of another. No one would say that the death of Jesus was meant to pervert the judgment of his heavenly Father.

Jesus' death can be misunderstood when we remove it from its context. The crucifixion can falsely appear to be the one and only saving action. This happens when we separate it from Jesus' entire earthly career of love and obedience to his heavenly Father. Yes, the cross saves us – but not the cross detached from the rest of Jesus' life. That was our first insight.

The cross, viewed as ransom, yielded a second insight. It is about the objective nature of redemption. Christians believe that our redemption took place at a particular moment. It was an event with a universal result. God's plan for the fullness of time is, in Christ, to "unite all things" (Eph. 1:10). God wants to save everyone. Redemption is not an event exclusively for those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. It does not happen only

---

following the only true and stedfast teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself." Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V, Preface, translated by Alexander Roberts and W. H. Rambaut, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Editors, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, 24 volumes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1883), vol. IX (*Irenaeus, vol. ii – Hippolytus, vol. ii – Fragments of Third Century*), p. 55. *Patrologia Graeca* 7:1120.

if and when we believe in it. Christian faith teaches that the event of God's forgiving love in Jesus Christ has consequences for all times and for all people. That includes those who lived before Christ and those living since then who are not Christians.

This leads us to a question about the relationship between the objective fact of being redeemed by God and subjective redemption. Subjective redemption is the act by which we become just and holy. That takes effort. The Scriptures tell us that we must repent and believe in the gospel (Mk. 1:15). We must take up our cross and follow Christ (Mt. 16:24). We must turn and become like little children in our faith (Mt. 18:3). Most of our parents taught us these things when we were children. They are subjective in that they pertain to us. The objective nature of redemption pertains to God. God acted "while we were still enemies." Redemption is prior to our acceptance of it. Redemption does not take place solely in our act of faith, but is an event in history and prior to faith.

This bring us to a question. We may be tempted to say that we are redeemed because we believe. But the Church's teaching puts that in question. It teaches that redemption is a divine act with a result. The divine act of redemption is prior to our faithful response. The failure of our human response does not alter God's saving will. **If God's act of redemption is independent of and prior to faith, how does that change our understanding of faith?**

God so Loved the World

The problem we have laid out is the objective nature of redemption. We often overlook it because we take our relationship with God for granted. That relationship is enshrined in the Gospel of John. There Jesus says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). We readily affirm that, due to God's love, the Word became flesh. That was God's initiative and God's doing.

I have shown how the second part of the gospel verse stands in tension with the first. The first is the objective fact of redemption. God so loved the world that "he gave his only Son." In the Son, God is uniting all things. The second part of the verse implies the subjective dimension. "Whoever believes in him should not perish." In subjective terms, we must believe in Christ. Eternal life hinges on that belief. The question would be merely academic were it not for the fact that it concerns the whole world, including those who do not believe as we do. Are we to simply say that those who do not believe are condemned to perish?

From the twentieth century until our day, this question has become ever more urgent. Remember, we said that the objective nature of redemption means not only that God has taken the initiative, but that God's actions have had a universal effect. God desires the salvation of all (1 Tim. 2:4). God has acted on our behalf, and thus all creation is redeemed. Objective redemption took place before we subjectively accepted it. Belief is our subjective acceptance of redemption, and subordinate to God's action.

This is not the place to explore the relation between Christian faith and the world religions. It is enough to quote from Vatican II. It said that non-Christians "may achieve eternal salvation" provided that they "seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their

conscience" (Lumen Gentium 16). The council taught the primacy of the conscience. The very desire to do God's will is an act of obedience to the divine Word. If grace can be said to move a person, that very motion stems from God. In that way, Vatican II taught that God can save those who do not profess explicit Christian faith.

If we had more time, we could discuss explicit and implicit faith. Throughout history, the Church has acknowledged that the desire to do God's will, even apart from the celebration of Baptism, represents true (if inexplicit) faith. Christians have always spoken of Baptism of desire. In short, the Vatican II teaching about the salvation of non-Christians, and the older teaching about Baptism of desire, have set our minds at ease. When we say, "Whoever believes in him should not perish," we can take comfort. Those who do not believe, at least not in an explicit ecclesial way, may still enjoy eternal life.

Eternal Will, Expressed in History

The last thing we need to consider is the relation between the objective and subjective nature of redemption. The objective nature has to do with God's loving kindness throughout history. From the very beginning of the human race, God has spoken a word to us. We call it the conscience. This instinct for distinguishing between right and wrong is an essential part of human nature. God placed it in our hearts, and it is a treasure, a gift that was never lost, not even when our ancestors sinned.

Throughout the long millennia since human beings first appeared, and then as God chose Israel to be God's own people, "the whole creation has been groaning in travail." Those are the words of St. Paul (Rom. 8:22). Humanity has been waiting for adoption – waiting for God to adopt us as sons and daughters. Our adoption was finally complete, we can say, when God's Word became flesh in Jesus Christ. From the viewpoint of human nature, Jesus achieved something unique. He was the first man who could truly say, "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30). Jesus was the "first fruits," according to St. Paul (1 Cor. 15:23), of an eventual harvest that will include us all. God foresaw our redemption from all eternity. It culminated in Jesus Christ, but its pre-history lies deep in God's eternal will.

Yes, we were redeemed at one point in history. That is true doctrine and the objective nature of redemption. But redemption in Christ expresses God's desire to save everyone. That was God's intention long before the birth of Jesus. The twentieth-century German theologian, Karl Rahner, has elaborated this point. Rahner saw that the objectivity of redemption, culminating in the death of Jesus, expressed God's eternal will to save. "The whole history of mankind," said Rahner, "always and everywhere stands under God's forgiving love in Christ."[8] From all eternity, God planned to save us by becoming one with us. God's love is stronger than our refusal to heed the divine word. Put another way, the objective aspect of redemption takes precedence over the subjective.

Although the cross is the "cause" of salvation, although it is an objective aspect of history, an action with a definite result, nevertheless that one act, performed in a moment, expressed God's saving will for all times and all people. We are saved by the cross of Christ, but not as an isolated action. The death of Jesus is the "sacramental" expression

[8] Rahner, "Salvation," Part IV "Theology," in Rahner (Ed.), *Sacramentum Mundi*, p. 1521.

of God's eternal will to save.[9] Its effects are retroactive and proactive. Retroactively, by dying on the cross, Jesus saved all people throughout history who have tried to heed their consciences and do God's will. Proactively, Jesus saved all who have tried to hear the divine Word and obey it. That includes us Christians in our subjective faith.

Our Freedom within God's Providence

We say that the cross is the "cause" of salvation. But the crucifixion is not a single act that stands by itself, isolated from the rest of salvation history. It is rather the culmination, the high point, of God's will to redeem all things. God expressed that will at the beginning of human history, by planting a conscience in our hearts. The emergence of Israel as a chosen people was a key step toward the realization of God's will. The incarnation of the Word was the decisive moment of redemption, the moment when God took our human nature to be God's own. Salvation history progresses in us, the members of the Body of Christ. We strive to hear God's Word and obey it. In us the redemption of all things continues.

We can only speculate why God did not want to achieve our redemption from above, in a single transcendental act of forgiveness. We believe that God wanted us to freely accept the divine Word. Human beings were to gradually elevate God's will over narrow self-interest. We were to accept obedience to God as our own most authentic freedom. This is the process of human evolution under the sign of the incarnate Word.[10]

We rightly prize our freedom as the trait that distinguishes us as human beings. But that freedom is not absolute. We exercise it within a situation not of our choosing. It is the situation defined by this place and time. We encounter it in the choices we make every day. Redemption is objective in that it defines our situation. Our response, within that situation, is the subjective aspect of redemption. We live, move, and have our being within God's providential will.

- We live within a history stamped by the event of the cross.
- We exercise a freedom shaped in part by our Christian tradition.
- We have our being as the consequences of redemption unfold in us.

That is how we experience freedom. That is how God's saving will expresses itself in us. That is how we participate in redemption. Let us rejoice that God has given us this choice. And let us choose wisely.

---

[9] Brandon R. Peterson, *Being Salvation: Atonement and Soteriology in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017). On pp. 18-35, and esp. pp. 33 ff., Peterson summarizes the "sacramental" assessments of Rahner's soteriology by Denis Edwards, Robin Ryan, Joseph H. Wong, Herbert Vorgrimler, and Eamonn Mulcahy.

[10] To speak of "human evolution under the sign of the incarnate Word" is to suggest that human nature cannot rest content with a purely natural good, and this is precisely the point of Rahner's "supernatural existential." Our ability to hear the Word of God – to encounter the Absolute in the matter of this world – is the basis for human rationality. Stephen S. Fields, *Analogies of Transcendence: An Essay on Nature, Grace & Modernity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), p. 69.