***Salvation Not Purchased:***

***Overcoming the Ransom Idea to Rediscover the Original Gospel Teaching***

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### Preface

As a pastor, I am concerned about the truly harmful effect that certain Christian beliefs are having on believers. Specifically in the area of atonement (“Jesus died for your sins”), there are some unhealthy, untrue, and unbiblical notions that are causing distress and confusion among Christians. It is my *pastoral* concern that drives me to speak up about these troubling beliefs.

One such idea is the notion that salvation was “purchased with blood,” that we are saved only because Jesus bled and died for us. Now, this says something good about Jesus (that he died heroically for others), but it implies something horrible about God the Father who would *require* such a sacrificial “price” or “ransom.” This would place a huge gulf between a stern Father and a merciful Son, which deeply contradicts the Bible. Many Christians need to face the fact that they have accepted the notion of a spiteful and violent God, an idea that goes against Jesus’ own teachings. This concept teaches us to be afraid of God, uncertain about the afterlife, and judgmental toward others—in direct contrast to the spirit and the content of what Jesus taught.

Since this is a problem with *beliefs*—with ideas that some Christians have about God—I will investigate the development of these beliefs, but my real interest is spiritual. Belief is *mental*, having to do with concepts and doctrines held by the mind. Faith is *spiritual* and relational; it concerns one’s spiritual health, one’s relationship with God, and how one treats others. Since actual spiritual values and loyalties are more important than mental notions, it is fair to say that *faith* is deeper than *belief*.

But beliefs still matter! Unexamined beliefs can do damage to people’s faith, leaving people confused about what God is like, and making it hard to trust God. As a result of distorted beliefs, sometimes even *conflicting* beliefs, many believers become discouraged, and some even lose their faith, or at least lose confidence *about* their faith. Furthermore, as mentioned, our faith-relationship with God has a deep effect on our relationships with people. If we believe that God is vengeful and cruel, we might allow ourselves to be vengeful as well, and use our beliefs to justify our nastiness. Violent God-concepts do real and lasting harm, psychologically and ethically. If we fail to recognize God as a loving parent, we will make many wrong assumptions about God.

And so, it is in order to help people’s *faith* that I am willing to critique some widely accepted beliefs. If your faith is strong enough to allow you to delve into doctrine without feeling threatened, then this book is for you. If you want to remain safe in your assumptions without examining them, without holding them up to the light of what Jesus said, then this book is not for you. I am asking that we question some of the things that are commonly said about God, so that we may really “understand these things” (John 3:10).[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is a plea to my fellow Christians for us to be thoughtful as well as heartfelt in our beliefs. It is really a plea for us to love God with all our *minds*, as well as with all our hearts and souls (Matt 22:37). If we love God will all our minds and hearts, we will be unafraid to examine a serious problem that has become lodged within Christian belief.

Let us dive in.

### Introduction

#### God-Talk

Some Christians can be heard saying something like this: “That should have been *me* up there on the cross, instead of Jesus. He paid my penalty and purchased my salvation.” This shows an intense gratitude for Jesus’ heroic life and death. It shows both a reverence for Jesus, who was sinless, and an awareness of one’s own sinfulness.

Unfortunately, the comment also implies a very troubling concept of God. It assumes that God demanded death as a paymentfor sin, but was fine with letting God’s innocent Son suffer that death on behalf of others. It assumes the existence of some law that there *must* be vengeance, even if the guilty parties are not the ones who suffer the vengeance!

Think of what this actually says about God the Father! It means that all God cares about is that *somebody* suffer for sin, even if it is an innocent person. Why such a violent setting for salvation? The answer that is commonly given is that God was *unable* to offer salvation until someone “paid the price,” which assumes that God *cannot forgive*, that God must obey some law that demands punishment (or else that God *created* such a law). It is also diminishes God to a transactional relationship in which salvation is bought through the suffering of another.

This is a terrifying choice. If God *could not* forgive sin until a sacrificial paymentwas made, then God would be subject to a law that is greater than God. That would make God weak. On the other hand, if God *would not* forgive sin until a human sacrifice was made, then God would be cruel, demanding a terrible retribution, but satisfied to have it directed against the one person who is truly innocent. This would not really be God, would it?—at least not the God of *Jesus’* teaching.

Have we been projecting our human, material ideas upon God, and then defending them without checking to see if they really fit with what Jesus himself taught? Remember what Jesus said about the Father, both in his sayings and in his stories (parables). Jesus taught that God both *wants* to forgive and save people, and is *able* to do so: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to *give* you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). God is genuinely forgiving and inviting, and need not be persuaded. Salvation is God’s own gift, freely given. The door is wide open, and God invites us in!

Salvation is the most important subject. Jesus was always extending salvation, revealing God’s nature, and working to build the family of God on earth. What did he say about God’s attitude toward us, and how we get saved?

#### The Outrageous Generosity of God

Consider the parable of the Prodigal Son. First we must know that the conventions of the time said that fathers had status and honor, and that sons were supposed to be respectful and obedient. In the parable, the first act of disrespect is when the younger son impatiently demands his inheritance. That is rude and selfish, but the father goes ahead and gives him his share of the property (Luke 15:12). The son takes it, goes off, and behaves badly, ending up in poverty, having to tend swine. What a shameful situation for a Jewish young man! He has an awakening and makes up his mind to return and beg forgiveness from his father. He carefully works on his apology speech, which will include a heavy dose of self-humiliation. He plans to say “I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands” (Luke 15:19).

He sets off for his father’s home, and when he was still far off, “his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (15:20). He is delighted to welcome his long-lost son. The son starts to give his self-shaming speech, but the dad doesn’t even want to hear it. He needs no apology, no humiliation, no admission of guilt! It seems that he interrupts the son, orders the servants to bring out the best robe, a ring, and sandals for the young man, and a fatted calf to be slaughtered for a feast (15:21–23).

The father whom Jesus pictures is shockingly forgiving. He is not at all concerned with his own image, reputation, authority, or even his honor. He *runs* to greet the son, and never asks for any expression of submission or shame. In fact, he showers honors upon him. Jesus knew how surprising this image of an astonishingly kind and forgiving father would be. Even today, it is more than many believers can accept. A father who would embrace his irresponsible son without shaming or scolding him is *still* very counter-intuitive for many people.

When the other son, the self-righteous one, refuses to join in the joyous celebration, the father says “we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life” (15:32). In other words, “don’t you get it? I am forgiving and loving. You need to forgive and share in the joy of your brother’s return. Stop being so joyless and judgmental! I am not about assigning blame, inflicting punishment, or demanding submission.”

This goes against the beliefs that many people have about God. Many assume that God must be authoritarian, demanding, and punishing. They take it for granted that *strength* must come with *violence*. But Jesus goes out of his way to shatter that idea, to show that God is energetically loving, and is strong enough to forgive, to heal relationships, and to change human lives. God embraces, gathers together (John 11:52), seeks out and saves the lost (Luke 19:10), does not **set** out to *punish*, but simply to *save*! God is love (1 John 4:16).

Jesus tries to get people to accept that God is extraordinarily kind and inviting, but this is too radical for many to accept. How can there be no payment system, no repentance schedule, no penance imposed upon either the Prodigal Son or upon us? And yet, Jesus shows that salvation is available to *anyone—*even to a bratty son—who sincerely turns to God.

Sincerity is the key. This story does not teach that it is alright to be lazy and irresponsible. The parable only works if we assume the young sonis honest, and his repentance sincere. Dishonesty is spiritually fatal. There is no salvation for the insincere, the pretender who is trying to get cheap forgiveness for evil behavior, but will actually go on misbehaving. It is doubtful whether a habitual liar can be saved at all: “the liar will perish” (Prov 19:9). Jesus’ message of mercy is not meant to remove the necessity of moral seriousness on our part. But it is helpful if this seriousness is *love*-motivated rather than *fear*-motivated. One does one’s best for a beloved parent because of *love*, not from anxious fear of punishment. If we truly love God, we will not be lazy, but will exert every effort to follow God’s way, seeking to embody God’s spiritual values. To understand the parable, one must have some of the same honesty and sincerity that the young son has.

Sometimes it is hard for us to accept the unconditional kindness of God. It may go against what we have learned. But if we open our hearts sincerely and learn about God’s love, then we can understand what is meant by this: salvation is God’s gift, not paid for, but freely granted. Jesus gets this message across by showing the father in the story being so generous, and demanding no payment through penance or suffering. There is no retribution, no punishment, only restoration and rejoicing.

God’s generous desire to save is also the point of the nearby parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” (Luke 15:4). Is Jesus saying the shepherd will neglect the ninety-nine? Of course not. He is using this exaggerated imagery to show that one “sheep” really matters, and the shepherd will go out and rescue that one! God cares for *each individual person*. There is “joy in heaven” when the *one* is found and recovered (15:7).

Similarly, a woman who loses a coin will sweep the floor, light the house, and search until she finds it, for there is *value* in the one coin (15:8–10). There is *value* in the one human being. The three parables in Luke 15 show God *seeking* out the lost to save them, without any punishing, scolding, or making anybody “pay.” The emphasis is on God’s love and generosity.

Jesus went out of his way to try to convince people that the Father is loving, all wise, abundantly forgiving, and provides a way for us to grow Godward. But people always find it hard to accept new ideas without mingling them with some old and unexamined ideas that they are carrying around. This happened with the early Christians as well.

One of these old ideas (held by Gentiles as well as Jews) is that justice requires retribution. A recent book by Ted Grimsrud (2013) shows how Jesus rejected the common belief that wrongdoing *has* to be met with violent retribution. He argues that “the logic of retribution” is still “deeply ingrained in the religious consciousness” of many Americans who assume that “God’s holiness or honor” hasto be “satisfied” through some act of retribution against sin.[[2]](#footnote-2) Grimsrud points out (as I will do) that Jesus heals and saves people simply out of God’s desire to make them whole, and without any accompanying theology of retribution. When he shows compassion to people, he is showing them *God’s* compassion, but they are slow to learn, even the ruler of a synagogue, to whom Jesus says: “ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” (Luke 13:16). He is trying to get the ruler to see that God cares so much more for this woman’s real needs than for rigid Sabbath rules!

But people were constantly misunderstanding Jesus, especially his own apostles. Jesus had to scold James and John when they asked if they could call down fire upon Samaritan village, in retribution for their lack of welcome (Luke 9:52–55). He worked tirelessly to wean the apostles from their biases and misconceptions. How often do we allow our material and earthly concepts to diminish our understanding of God?

Let us look into this by digging more deeply into the biblical record. By the way, this does not imply that I consider the gospels to be flawless records, like tape recordings, but I *do* consider them to be largely reliable reports.

1. I am using the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) for Bible quotes, except when otherwise indicated (NIV for New International Version, etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement*, 5, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)