

Restoration and God's People



Mark Young, PhD

Experience: President, Denver Seminary

So, let's go back and talk a bit about redemption just to fill in perhaps from what we did last week. We should do five weeks on redemption, but let's just kind of zero down on what we believe redemption to be and how we see it in Scripture.

So, you would recall that we use three words that begin with the letter R to describe how we believe the Bible presents redemption: rescue, restoration, and then we add ransom. Now ransom is a means whereby rescue and restoration occurs, particularly in the New Testament. So, let's go back and look briefly at how rescue, restoration, and ransom are evident in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

So, rescue is clear. The dominant event in Israel's history was their rescue from Egypt, when God stepped into their situation as an oppressed people in Egypt and He brought them out. The key passage for you to have in mind is Exodus 6:2–8. The language of redemption is explicitly used to describe what God did. For example, verse 6. God is talking to Moses, and He says, "Say to the Israelites, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.'" So, see the language of rescue there. So, you have the idea, "I will free you. I will bring you out." All of that language indicates that God's going to come into their situation and bring them out or set them free from that oppression. This idea of being set free or rescued from a precarious situation is also seen when the same language is used to describe God's rescue of someone from death. And so, the language of redemption is clearly based on that idea of rescue.

What about restoration? Where do we see that? Well, certainly in the Exodus narrative. God rescues His people from Egypt, and He restores them to the place that He had promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. They never possessed that place. In fact, the

Scripture is clear that Abraham and his descendants, although they occupied the territory, never claimed it as their own. They were like wandering peoples in the region. But nonetheless, that's the land He had promised them. So, God restores them to that place; not yet as a nation, but as a people as He brings them out of Egypt.

Probably the clearest language of restoration and act of restoration, however, is when God does restore His people from captivity in Babylon to the land of Israel. This is the event after they've been taken into exile by the Babylonians. You have the fall of Jerusalem, excuse me, the fall of Israel at the hand of the Assyrians, the fall of Judah at the hand of the Babylonians, and then the exile period. The books of the exile would be the book of Daniel, where he's living in the throne room basically of the Babylonians, and the book of Esther as well. And then God restores His people to the land (books of Nehemiah and Ezra). And the language of redemption is used to describe God's restoration—does that make sense?—to the land. Let me give you some verses. The prophet Isaiah uses this language again and again. You could look at Isaiah 43:1 and Isaiah 44:23. Probably one of the clearest ones is Isaiah 48:20. I'll read that to you. It says this, "Leave Babylon. Flee from the Babylonians! Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it. Send it out to the ends of the earth and say, 'The LORD has redeemed his servant, Jacob.'" Jacob being a metaphor for the nation. So, the language of redemption, of restoring them to the land, is clear there. And then Isaiah 52:9 is another example.

But what about the idea of ransom? I think I said last week that the idea of ransom and redemption is probably most evident in the New Testament. That doesn't mean it isn't present in the Old Testament as well. So related to ransom, there are two primary Hebrew verbs. Now the first one is simply probably pronounced pada or paw-dah. And this has to do with the ... it's the substitution of a required person or an animal for something that belongs to God. So, the idea was the firstborn of the livestock and the firstborn of the children were God's. That was the requirement of the law. And so, as a result, the firstborn of the livestock would be required to be redeemed or to be sacrificed, but you could redeem the firstborn and bring it back to yourself rather than have it sacrificed. This was true with children. So, the firstborn children belonged to the Lord but could be redeemed by paying a price and bringing them to yourself or preserving them unto yourself. That was the first idea of ransom. You could look at Exodus 13:13. You

could look at also Exodus 21:13 .

And then the second major word used for ransom in the Old Testament is the Hebrew verb *gaal*. And you may have heard of *goel*, the avenger, the redeemer for the family. The *gaal* is a legal term for the deliverance of someone, some property, through family relation. So, it works like this. If someone in your family was enslaved or brought into servitude because they fell indebted, then the redeemer could come and pay for their release from servitude. So, it's the same idea as *pada*. It's the payment of a price for the bringing back into the former relationship, the former status of a person. This word is found thirteen times in Isaiah. It's literally the word *redeemer*; it's the way we would translate it. A person who buys the rights to or bring someone back into relationship. Probably the most famous example of this is in the book of Ruth where she is redeemed by her relative from another relative who had rights to her. So, he pays that other relative so that he can bring her into his family for her good.

So, there is ransom in the Old Testament. However, the idea of ransom as payment for sin, which is built on these terms, is far clearer in the New Testament. So, remember what we said last week: To know the Lord, if you were a member of the nation of Israel, meant that you knew Him as Redeemer. Here's a quote: "Israel never knew the Lord as anyone other than the Lord her God who brought her out of Egypt." This was the critical event. In the Psalms, just reading Psalm 77 recently, there's a long list of everything that David is afraid of, everything that is creating fear and distress. And in the middle of the Psalm, "But we remember that you brought us out of Egypt." This was the event they always went back to: that their God would intervene on their behalf. So, redemption clearly is the primary way that God made Himself known to His people.

Now in the New Testament, when we talk about redemption, we have to remember when Jesus comes and redemption becomes a language to describe Him, that language isn't used in a void or in a vacuum. The idea of Messiah coming—rescuing His people from the oppression of the Romans and restoring them to the kingdom that He had already established through David and Solomon—was undergirding everything they thought about God. So, when you read the New Testament and you see Jesus interacting with His family and neighbors from Nazareth or Pharisees or anyone else in first-century Jewish world, this idea that Messiah would come and rescue His people and restore them to the kingdom and restore

His kingdom was undergirding the way they saw Jesus. So, clearly, they thought if the power that they were to be rescued from was military and political in nature that the only way they could be rescued and restored from that power was through a political and military Messiah. So, if that was their major expectation—Jesus' claims that the kingdom is here, that the redemption has begun; He is called and does not deny that He is the Messiah, and then He's not doing anything to throw the Romans out—what kind of a disconnect do you have?

This, I think, was the major issue in John the Baptist's life. Do you remember the story where John the Baptist is in prison? He's imprisoned by King Herod (the Romans are obviously propping up his rule). And he sends his disciples to Jesus and basically says, "Are you the Messiah?" after his ministry had been built around proclaiming Jesus as Messiah and making straight the way for Messiah. So why would John the Baptist, all of a sudden, ask this honest question? Well, clearly his expectations of what Messiah would do had not been met. The Romans were still in power. Those whom the Romans propped up were still in power. And, in fact, he was suffering because of that. So, it makes perfect sense that he would ask or have his disciples ask Jesus, "Are you really the Redeemer? Are you really the one who's going to rescue and restore?"

This language of rescue and restoration gets filled out most fully by the apostle Paul. Jesus will use the language, we'll see in just a moment, particularly the ransom language, but the rescue and restoration language is very clear in Paul's literature. Look at Galatians 1:3–5 with me, if you would. Paul writes it this way: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father to whom be the glory forever and ever," to rescue us from the present evil age. And then look over, turn over to Colossians 1:13, another very clear use of this language of rescue. "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." So, the language is used twice. He's "rescued us from the dominion of darkness"—that's where we were trapped in our blindness—and "brought us into the kingdom of the Son." And it's in the Son that we have this redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Two metaphors: brought out of darkness and having our sins forgiven. So, rescue and restoration are clearly used by Paul to describe redemption through Jesus.

What about ransom? Mark 10:45 is a place to go and see this language used clearly. Mark 10:45. In this passage, Jesus says this: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom.” And, of course, giving your life as a ransom means you put yourself into the hands of those who have been oppressing you or holding you so that they can be set free and returned.

Let me give you some other verses. We won't take the time to look at them all but just to make sure we're clear on this. In 1 Timothy 2:5–6, Paul writes, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. The testimony given in its proper time.” You might look up 1 Corinthians 6:19 (the second part of that) as well: “You are not your own; you were bought with a price.” There's that use of the financial metaphor related to ransom. And then that same language is very powerfully used in Revelation 5:9 and 10. You remember how that works? In the heavenly throne room, they have the scroll, which is basically the metaphor for the unfolding of human history. And they ask, Who is worthy to unroll the scroll? which means, Who's worthy to unroll the end of human history? And they look, and no one can be found. And finally, they see the Lamb who was slain, and He is deemed to be worthy to open the scroll. In verse 9, they say all of those in the heavenly throne room sang a new song. And they said, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased people for God [You purchased humanity for God] from every tribe and language and people and nation. And you made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

So, what is this great rescue and restoration that Jesus accomplishes through the ransom, through the price that's paid? It's that humanity now is rescued from the curse of sin, death, and restored to life. Life in fellowship with God. We would argue that any who finds life in God, any who expresses faith in the one true God, does so because of what Christ accomplished on the cross. That's why the language of being born again, given life, is only possible because of what Christ has done on the cross. Does that make sense? That very quick flyby—rescue, restoration, ransom—that's the language of redemption.

Then let's talk about this idea of how God will accomplish His redemptive mission through His people. God accomplishes His redemptive mission through His people. Now remember when

we were back in the creation narrative, we talked about how God delegated His reign over the earth to image bearers, to humanity. They were to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and rule over it. And the Scripture never tells us why He would do that. In the same way, the Scripture never tells us why He delegates the execution of His redemptive mission to humanity, to people, to now His people. And so, when we talk about His people in the Old Testament and the New Testament, we then see that the Scripture presents a clear distinction. There are the people of God, and then there is everyone else. And in that particularity—that God creates unto Himself a people—we might be tempted to think that God's desire for all of creation to know Him and worship Him is set aside. You see what I'm saying? So, God's desire to be known is universal. God's desire to be worshiped is universal. But all of a sudden, we see God focusing His attention on His people. So from universal to particular. So, the question is, When God chooses and creates a people unto Himself, is His universal purpose or His universal desire to be known and worshiped set aside? And so, the answer to that question that we're going to give over and over again is no. God accomplishes His universal desire to be known and worshiped by all through His people. It's never just for our own sakes that God makes us His people; it's for the sake of all people that God creates a people.

Now I would confess to you that when I was first taught the Bible, first began to read the Bible seriously, I was taught, I'll put it this way, I took away from that instruction that basically the Old Testament is about Israel and the end of human history is about Israel: the restoration of Israel and the kingdom and that everybody else was kind of a plan B; that the Old Testament was about Israel. They rejected Him. So, God went to plan B, which was gentiles, but in the end, everything will be made like it once should have been and so Israel's kingdom will be restored. And those two were brought together in my thinking. So, as I read the Old Testament, I read it as if God's sole concern was Israel, His sole concern was His people, Israel. When I began to realize that the Bible actually told the story of God's redemptive mission for all of humanity, that put into tension what I had learned about the Old Testament. And I'd heard things like, well, God doesn't really send His people to the nations until the great commission in Matthew 28. That's something that comes later. It's different. It's an addition. But what I began to see is that way of thinking about the Bible and that way of thinking about God's plan was erroneous. God's concern is always for all people, even from the very beginning of establishing His particular people.

So how is it that God accomplishes His redemption mission through His people? The first is the Redeemer, Jesus fully human, comes through the line of Abraham, a descendant of Abraham. So, the one in whom redemption is accomplished, Jesus Himself, is a fully human descendant of the one who is the beginning of God's own people. But that's not all. God also fulfills His mission through the redeemed, that is, through His people who are given a charter to live in ways that reveal Him to all the nations. So, through His people, the nations can come to know Him and worship Him. And on the basis of what Christ will do and has done, they are the redeemed, become the redeemed. So, we play the same role that the people of God have always played. We're to live in such a way that Redeemer God is made known to all people. It's as simple as that. That mission is established in the very beginning of God's establishment of a people and carries out through the rest of the Bible. That's why I would say to you that the bulk of the pages of the Bible are devoted to the shaping of God's people for participation in His redemptive mission. So, everything in the law—that's shaping a people so that they can better reveal the Redeemer God. The way God intervenes in their history—that's shaping His people so that they can better reveal. It's never just for their sake. It's always for the sake of the nations. The discipleship, all that we experience, all the letters of Paul, it's shaping His people to better reveal Redeemer God.

So those are some bold claims, perhaps a little different. So, let's look at how they are worked out in Scripture. So, let's go to the very founding of God's special people, Genesis 12. So take your Bibles and turn back to Genesis 12. And we'll see the beginning. If you were to put the Bible together—we talked about those critical moments in the history of the story of the Bible—Genesis 12 becomes one of those critical moments. Remember how the story unfolds? Adam. Judgment, mercy, and grace; remember that pattern? Then you have the Noah story, the flood story. Noah comes out. He's been the one through whom God will perpetuate the human race. He falls into gross immorality, but God does not in fact destroy him. And then you have Genesis 10, which describes this very diverse world with all these different nations and tribes living in different places, doing different things, speaking different languages. And then all of a sudden, Genesis 11. That's the way the first eleven chapters play out. Genesis 11, it seems to me, is chronologically before Genesis 10. Genesis 11 describes how the diversity of Genesis 10 occurs. And then you have Genesis 12. That's the pivot point.

At the end of Genesis 11, the people are scattered, the people are judged; and there's very little indication that they are living out the mandate that they'd been created to live out in the garden of Eden. So, kind of a scene of, "Well, God, have you failed," basically, "What you intended is not happening." Genesis 12 begins with a command. "The LORD had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.'" Well, who is this Abraham? That's the question. How does he come into this story? Well, he comes in starting in verse 27 of chapter 11. He's the son of Terah. They live in Ur of the Chaldeans, and we have no idea of two things. We have no idea why God called Abraham, and we have no idea how God called Abraham. So, if you were to read Joshua 24:2, you would read that Terah is identified as someone who worshiped false gods. So, what is the likelihood that Abraham, as the son of Terah, also worshiped false gods?

Yes. I mean, it's like the old Ivory soap commercial, 99.4 percent pure—or whatever they said. So, here's this worshiper of false gods. And based on where they lived, it's a high probability that they worshiped astral entities or stars or the moon or whatever. So, here's this worshiper of false gods. Why him? The Scripture never ever gives us a hint as to why God revealed Himself to Abraham and gave him this call out of all the rest of humanity. What we do know later is that Abraham responded to this call by faith. And so, we could perhaps speculate that God knew Abraham would respond by faith, but the Bible doesn't give us that luxury. We don't know why God chose Abraham to be the founder of His people. How did He do it? No idea. Earthquake maybe? Asteroid, still small voice, some vision? No idea. And isn't it interesting that God in His wisdom as He gave us His Word didn't reveal to us why or how He revealed Himself to Abraham. I've wondered about that. And I've often wondered, if He had revealed that information to us, if we wouldn't have expected that God had to reveal Himself to everyone that way or that perhaps we would have looked for a certain set of traits to be the one whom God would favor and elevate Abraham over God in our thinking about the story. God doesn't give us that luxury. He simply tells us in verse 1 of chapter 12, "The LORD had said to Abraham, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.'"

This first word in the text is a command, what grammarians call an imperative. And the form of this command is very intense. If we were to kind of translate it, we'd say, "Get yourself up, and get

out of here. Get up and go.” Very definite, “Get yourself up and go, Abraham.” And probably one of the most surprising verses in all of Scripture is verse 4, where we read, “So Abram went.” Notice what He says to him, “Get yourself up and go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.” When He asks Abraham to “leave your country, your people, your household,” He’s asking Abraham to give up his identity, his security, his livelihood, and any sense of a future. It’s not asking much, is it? Fundamentally, everything that Abraham would have used to define himself, God is telling him to leave. That’s why verse 4 is so amazing. Oh, and not only that, He says, “Leave all this and go to the land I will show you,” meaning He hadn’t told him yet. So basically, the command is, “Leave everything and entrust your future to me,” because that’s exactly what all of these things represented. So, when we read that Abraham went, it’s pretty remarkable.

Now before we get to Abraham leaving, God gives him promises. And that provides a little more insight and impetus into perhaps why Abraham was willing to go. He says to him, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you and I will make your name great.” So, think about “make you into a great nation.” That implies that there will be a group of people with geographical and political identity that will be known as the people of Abraham. Now there were other words. He could have said, “I will make you into a great family, or I will make you into a great clan, or I will make you into a great ethnolinguistic people.” All of those were possible in Hebrew, but He says, “I will make you into a great nation.”

The idea of nation here seems to imply that what God is talking about is more than just a racial distinction as those who carry the bloodline of Abraham but those who will be somehow associated by Abraham in a nonracial or ethnically defined group. That’s very possible for the reading of this language. “And I will bless you.” Blessing in the Old Testament almost always involve material prosperity. And so, when He says, “I will bless you,” He’s saying, “I will prosper you with whatever is necessary for you to survive, and I will make your name great.” There was nothing of more value than a good reputation. When He says, “I will make your name great,” He’s basically saying others will speak well of you, others will consider you to be honored, someone to honor or to be praised. That was more valuable than camels, more valuable than gold, more valuable than any other material possession of that era. By the way, there’s a little irony. Why did the people of Babel

build the tower in Genesis 11? To make their name great. And what does God say to Abraham? "I will make your name great." And the implication is if Abraham becomes a nation, if he's blessed and if his name is great, so will God's name be, because God has told him to leave and do these things, and God has promised to make it happen.

Now look at your Bibles carefully. The very next line in most English translations starts with an "and," like in the NIV. It says, "And you will be a blessing." And that is a legitimate translation, but probably more literal is to see that verb or that line as a second command, "And be a blessing." So, "Get yourself up and go. I'm going to do these three things for you." Second command. "You'll be a blessing." So how do we do this? In Hebrew, the structure of this passage is very symmetrical and very clear. There are two commands, "Get yourself up and go," that's one command in Hebrew. Second, "Be a blessing." Each command is followed by three supporting verbs, "I will make you a great nation. I will bless you. I will make your name great." The second command, "I will bless those who bless you. I will curse those who curse you," or literally, "I will curse those who belittle you, and all nations will be blessed through you." This structure in Hebrew more likely than not implies that each purpose, each command has a purpose. And when put together, it leads us to see that the last line of this structure indicates the ultimate purpose of these two commands.

So the first command, "Get yourself up and go. Here's what I'm going to do for you." Second command, "Be a blessing. And I will bless" verse 3, "those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse." The idea here, of course, is that how people respond to Abraham is how God will respond to those people. And what you have to realize, of course, is that because Abraham has gone at the command of God, everything Abraham does is to be identified with that God. This is actually a promise that God will protect Abraham; that those who seek him harm, God will come against them. And then at the end, the ultimate purpose, the outcome, what God intends with all of this, "So that all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

If you have a paper Bible, what I would do is write the words "so that." (I wouldn't recommend you write it on your screen.) But write "so that" in the margin of your Bible. So, the purpose, the outcome that God intends for promising to Abraham that he will become a great nation, for creating a people unto Himself, is that all peoples will be blessed through His people: "All peoples will be

blessed through you.” You’re going to hear me say that a hundred times: The purpose of God is always the blessing of all peoples. Whatever God does to, for, among, or against His people is always for the sake of His purpose that He be known and worshiped by all peoples. Everything that we experience as the people of God, as we faithfully follow Him or even as we need to be corrected by Him, is to our benefit but never just for our sakes. We benefit from what God does in our life just as Israel would benefit. The promise of the law is clear, isn’t it? “If you obey, you will prosper. If you obey, I will protect you. If you obey, you will experience blessing like you’ve never seen, but it’s never just for your sake.” God will reveal Himself to all peoples so that they can know and worship Him through the way He interacts with His people. That was true in the founding of the nation through Abraham, and it’s true for you and for me today.

That basic change, you just flip that switch and the way you understand how God relates to you and how God relates to His people will change the way you read the Bible; change the way you think about your Christian life; change the way you think about what you do to live in ways that are more consistent with God’s Word; change the way you think about your own sin; change the way you think about your future, your calling. It will, it can, change everything because now I’m not just the focus. Whatever God does for me is always for the sake of others. This idea then carries through the promise that God made to Abraham, that all nations would be blessed through him is repeated to Isaac; it’s repeated to Jacob; and ultimately, it becomes the charter for the nation.