

The gospel – a panoramic view (II)

Based on what I said last time, here's my current view of the gospel (it's just a view; I'm happy to receive comments and discussion):

The gospel (as preached by Jesus and the early church) is entirely contained in the story of Jesus as the fulfilment of the huge range of prophecies in the Old Testament, i.e. the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. *This gospel is what brings...*

Salvation is God's eternal plan and purpose – based entirely on his grace and mercy – to restore humankind to its pre-Fall immortality, that is, conquering sin and death. *The scripture tells us about this salvation by using...*

Salvation metaphors are the pictures used within the Bible, expressed particularly in the words of Jesus, Paul, Peter etc, to help us to appreciate that salvation, to receive it by faith and to apply it to our lives.

On this I stand; I can do no other!

Atonement theories, by contrast, are human-derived theories, based on our exegesis of the Scriptures; they can help us to appreciate and apply the biblical metaphors, but they are not inspired, and so they must not be allowed to take precedence over inspired Scripture. (Penal substitution, in my view, is one such atonement theory; it is not the gospel.)

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So today I'm going to look at a few of those **salvation metaphors**, and I hope that we can all revel together in these pictures – and others – as we read our Bibles day by day – an exciting prospect!

(Here, I acknowledge my huge debt to Brad Jersak's *A More Christ-Like God – A More Beautiful Gospel*.)

### **Lost-and-found**

To start us off, here's one of Jesus' favourite pictures of salvation: *Jesus said to [Zacchaeus], "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."* (Luke 19:9,10)

If Jesus says that Zacchaeus **has received** salvation, on that very day, then that's good enough for me. But could Zacchaeus have received salvation, even before Jesus had died and risen? Yes, why not? We are saved by grace, through faith. God can bring us salvation wherever and however he wants – he knows our hearts. Who are we to specify the exact requirements for salvation? On that day, Zacchaeus was brought (back) into covenant with God, into relationship with God – that, to me, is salvation.

What is the reaction of the religious leaders to Jesus' free gift of salvation? They complained that *"he welcomes sinners and eats (fellowships) with them"* (Luke 15:2) – too right he does! And in

response to the Pharisees' comments, Jesus gives us three more 'lost-and-found' metaphors: the lost coin, the lost sheep and (my favourite) the lost (prodigal) son. The last one is such a wonderful picture of the totally outrageous love of God. And in each case, what is the result? Rejoicing – **big time!**

### **Great physician**

On another occasion, when Jesus got a similar complaint from the Pharisees, he responded, *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* (Mk 2:17)

In this metaphor, sin isn't seen as guilt to be punished but a spiritual disease to be healed. Sin is the dis-ease in our relationship with God; and it can wreck our social health and our physical health. Salvation can therefore be seen as healing – but not automatic healing, because sin damages us in many ways, and God is not a slot machine, but God's **direction** for us in salvation is towards shalom, wholeness in the widest sense.

### **Healing serpent**

Talking to Nicodemus, Jesus states, *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."* (John 3:14,15) Later, Jesus says, *"But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."* and, to be sure we understand properly, John adds, *"He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."* (John 12:32).

This is another healing metaphor, harking back to Numbers 21, where God brought physical healing to the Israelites: they just had to trust God and simply look at a bronze snake on a pole. So here, Jesus pictures sin as a fatal disease, and Paul later heightens the image by saying *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.'"* (Gal 3:10)

To receive spiritual healing from spiritual death, we simply have to look in faith (trust) to the Cross of Jesus.

### **Atoning sacrifice**

Some people think that this image recalls the Old Testament sacrifices where a goat, offered by and for the people, is killed, and the blood sprinkled on the Mercy Seat. Another goat is offered to 'take away the sins of the people', where the priest lays his hand on the goat's head, confesses the people's sins, and sends it off into the wilderness. Both of these might fit with the idea that we have to placate God, but (a) Jesus is called the Lamb of God, never the goat of God and (b) God doesn't need placating anyway – his attitude to us is that of the prodigal Father, longing for our return.

The way Paul sees it is, *"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith."* (Rom 3:25) So it's not **we** (or a priest) who offer the atoning sacrifice, but God. Clearly, it's **we** who need the sacrifice; it's **we** who need to be reconciled to God, not God who needs to be reconciled to us. Indeed, God never left us, never separated himself from us. *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."* (1 John 4:10)

## **The Lamb of God**

*“Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed.”* (1 Cor 5:7) This is the picture of that final fellowship meal of the Israelites in captivity in Egypt: a family meal, yet shared in hospitality with others. The blood of the lamb was smeared on the doorposts, and this kept the destroying angel at bay, so God’s wrath, which was directed at the defiant Egyptians and their gods, was averted. (Note that God didn’t do this lightly; he sent Pharaoh nine plague-type warnings, and only when he refused all these did God bring the tenth and most terrible plague.)

But when death comes, who brings it? *“When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the door-frame and will pass over that doorway, and **he will not permit the destroyer** to enter your houses and strike you down.”* (Ex 12:23) So the blood of the lamb acts to protect God’s people from the destroyer; likewise, Jesus’ blood welcomes God’s presence into our lives and protects us from the destroyer.

## **Redemption and jubilee**

This is another wonderfully rich biblical image of God’s salvation. To us, ‘redeeming’ might mean that something or someone that has gone wrong, and we manage to make it good again; or we might think of claiming the money or goods promised on a voucher, but that’s a thin reflection of the Bible’s view.

In the OT, God says, *“Remember you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord **redeemed** you”* (Deut 15:15), and that is the constant back-story for the NT’s teachings about salvation.

Then there’s the wonderful story of redemption in the book of Ruth – do read it, if you don’t know it; it’s about freedom from bondage, alienation, estrangement; it’s a glorious picture of relationship in adversity – so it’s a picture of the forthcoming gospel!

Then there’s the year of jubilee when all debts were forgiven and the land restored to its original owners (nice theory, but not really put into practice by the Israelites). Again, it’s a picture of the outrageous grace of God.

Not quite sure if it’s about salvation, but this reminds me of the book of Hosea, a picture of God outrageously forgiving and forgiving and forgiving, despite Israel’s constant unfaithfulness.

And when Jesus announced the start of his ministry and mission, he quoted Isaiah 61, proclaiming *“the year of the Lord’s favour”*, thereby identifying himself with the idea of jubilee, freedom, redemption, the restoration of all that was lost. Why and how did this freedom come? There was no condition: Jesus simply announced that salvation was here, **now!**

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.*

**Today** *this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*

(Luke 4:18ff)

Three additional common NT metaphors, all of which form part of redemption, are adoption, inheritance and reconciliation, and these are evident in the parable of the prodigal son.

This is such a huge and glorious area! I could spend ages unpacking it all.

So can 'redemption' be reduced to: Jesus pays the price to buy us back from death? (But in which case, who is paying what and to whom?) No, it's way richer and more wonderful than some sort of legal transaction.

### **Ransom**

Jesus once said, "*the Son of Man came ... to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45), and Paul writes that Jesus "*gave himself as a ransom for all people.*" (1 Tim 2:6) but it's not obvious to know quite what this means. We associate ransom with a terrorist holding someone in bondage, and that image is used in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, as Aslan gives himself over to the witch, and is slain, to release Edmund.

Yes, in some sense we were 'bought' "*You are not your own; you were bought at a price.*" (1 Cor 6:19,20), but we need to be careful how we apply this metaphor. Again, to whom was the ransom paid? Not to God because God isn't holding us in slavery. Not to Satan, because God owes Satan nothing. Not to the Law, either, because mercy trumps Law.

No, Jesus ransoms us from **death**, by dying for us (he didn't have to die – he willingly chose to die), paying with his life. But Christ owed death nothing either, so he conquered death altogether. What a glorious good news! (But just don't get too hung up about trying to 'understand' it!)

### **Where are you at?**

Where are you at in your spiritual life? Which of these metaphors speaks most powerfully into your situation? And for those people you know, who haven't yet realised what Jesus has done for them, which aspect of the gospel might speak most directly to them?

If we're wanting people to come into a relationship with God then we can introduce them to Jesus and allow God to speak into their situation, into their needs, into their worldly relationships so that, in course of time, they will gladly bow the knee to our wonderful Saviour.

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