

christ's death: a rescue mission, not a payment for sins

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Because we don't owe a debt of guilt for Adam's sin, Jesus' suffering wasn't a payment to the Father.

Every day, Christians pray "deliver us from evil," not knowing that the Greek original reads "the evil," that is, "the evil one." The New Testament Scriptures are full of references to the malice of the devil, but we generally overlook them. I think this is because our idea of salvation is that Christ died on the cross to pay His Father the debt for our sins. The whole drama takes place between Him and the Father, and there's no role for the evil one.

But for the early Christians, the evil one was a very real and malevolent presence. Temptation coaxes us toward sin, and sin leads to sickness and death, and ultimately confinement in the realm of the evil one. The devil's main purpose is not to scare us, in a horror-movie way; when we're scared of him we're alert to him, and that might undermine his plans. Instead, he wants to quietly, subtly lure us into stepping away from God. Sin leads to death, but death also leads to sin. Hebrews 2:14 explains that the evil one has always controlled the human race through fear of death; that's what most deeply terrifies us and makes us grab at earthly security. But "whoever would save his life will lose it" (Matthew 16:25). That's the bitter trick. Desperate, selfish clutching lands us in the realm of death.

But God sent Christ to rescue us; He took on human form (showing us that these humble human bodies can bear the presence of God, like the Burning Bush bore His fire), lived a sinless life, went into the realm of Hades like all human flesh, and then blasted it open by His power. Death could not contain Him, because He is Life. When we join ourselves to Him and begin to assimilate His Life, we too are freed from the control of the evil one.

This is not a "ransom" paid to the Father; the Father wasn't holding us captive. It is an offering, but not a payment. Look at it this way. Christ suffered to save us from our sins in the same way a fireman suffers burns and wounds to save a child from a burning home. He may dedicate this courageous act as an offering to the fire chief he loves and admires. He may do it to redeem the child from the malice of the

arsonist who started the fire. But his suffering isn't paid to anyone, in the sense of making a bargain. Likewise, God redeemed His people from the hand of Pharaoh when He rescued them in the Red Sea. But He didn't **pay** Pharaoh anything. He Himself was not paid anything. It was a rescue action, not a business transaction, and our redemption by Christ is the same.

There are some things that developed in Western Christianity that don't appear in this account at all. As you can see, there's no concept that our sins put us in God's debt legally: No idea that somebody has to pay something before He can forgive us. He just forgives us. When the prodigal son came home, the father was already running toward him with his arms open. He didn't say, "I'd like to take you back, son, but my hands are tied. Who's going to pay this Visa bill?"

This means that something else is missing—guilt. Now, of course we are responsible for our sins, and guilty in that sense. But we're not born carrying the debt of guilt for Adam's sin. That's what the fourth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo meant by the term "Original Sin." But his theory was not widely accepted in the early church (in fact, not all Eastern Christians call him a saint, and he was far from the towering figure that he became in Western thinking later on.) The idea of inborn debt compelled Augustine to say that, logically, a baby who died before baptism would have to be damned.

Instead, although early Christian spiritual writings are continually focusing on sin and repentance, the concepts of guilt and debt rarely appear. St. Andrew, like most writers of the age, views sin instead as a self-inflicted wound. Likewise, he sees God as compassionate rather than wrathful. God is always described as rushing to meet us like the father of the prodigal, or coming like the good Samaritan to bind up our wounds.

In Orthodoxy, there is less of an emphasis on discrete, external acts of sin, and more a sense of it being a pervading sickness. Christ didn't come to save us just from the penalty for our sins, from death and eternal misery. He came to save us from our sins, now, today--from the poison that flows in our veins, that alienates us from the Light, that marches us toward death. He saves us like the fireman carrying that child from a burning building. We are as helpless as that child; nothing we do saves us. But as we gradually creak open the rusty doors of our hearts, we begin to discover the faint sense of His presence.

He was there all along, as He is present in every person He creates. Attending to that flickering flame, we nurture it and allow it to spread, until we are filled with His light and glory.