“Redemption”
A Word Study

By Paul N. Jackson

“They are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

ROMANS 3:24 (HCSB)

LESSON REFERENCE
FBS: Romans 3:19-23
This year our nation celebrates its 229th year of independence—freedom from the shackles of servitude and bondage to England. This celebration of liberation causes me to think of the day I received Christ and was delivered from the crushing sentence of sin. I was a 12-year-old boy at the Venetian Hills Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia in 1968. Also as I wrote this article, I was preparing a message about the most dramatic biblical example of liberation—the one Saul of Tarsus experienced on the Damascus road. That day Jesus unexpectedly intercepted the murderous fanatic and transformed him into an unwavering herald of the gospel he once tried to destroy. America’s independence in 1776, my conversion at age 12, and Paul’s Damascus road encounter are examples of redemption experiences.

Paul’s conversion event gripped him so deeply that some 20 years later to the church at Rome he devoted an entire letter to explain God’s redemptive work. In this letter we find the word under consideration for this article—“redemption.” What is the origin of the word?

Redemption in the Old Testament

The theological idea of redemption—of an entity being redeemed—has a rich heritage. Old Testament writers described property, animals, persons, and the nation that were all redeemed (or “bought back”) by the payment of a price. The concept of a no-cost redemption would have been completely alien to the people of Israel. Boaz and Jeremiah, for example, played the role of “kinsman redeemer” involving the “buying back” of property (Lev. 25:25-28; Ruth 3–4; Jer. 32:6-8). Even though all the first-born males of all livestock belonged to God, the Old Testament made provisions for buying back donkeys and unclean animals (Ex. 13:13; Num. 18:14-17).

This privilege of redemption extended also to individual Israelites. Each Israelite had to pay a ransom for his life at the time of the national census. Firstborn sons had to be redeemed because they belonged to God since the first Passover when the death angel “passed over” the homes where the lamb’s blood was sprinkled on the doorposts (Num. 3:40-51). As another example of redemption, a man would be put to death for his out-of-control bull goring a neighbor to death, unless an acceptable fine was paid to the dead man’s family to redeem the owner’s life (Ex. 21:28-32).

Redemption language in reference to the nation described God delivering His people from Egyptian bondage and Babylonian captivity (Ex. 6:6; Isa. 43:1-4). The exodus event established an important theological foundation for believers’ later understanding of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection.

Redemption in the New Testament

In the New Testament the idea of “redemption” moves from the material to the spiritual realm. Luke linked two “redeeming” events—the Old Testament exodus story that described Moses delivering the Israelites from physical bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt and the New Testament exodus story of Jesus delivering humanity from spiritual bondage to sin and Satan through His death on the cross. Luke 9:28-36 records that Jesus had a conversation on the mount of transfiguration with Moses and Elijah concerning His death. The Greek word underlying and referring to Jesus’ coming death translated as “departure” in verse 31 (NIV) is exodos. In this sense, Jesus functioned as a “second Moses” who redeemed from death to life those who believe in Him. Later Luke recorded Jesus’ promise of believers’
redemption “drawing near” (21:28, NIV).

Basically, the word “redemption” in Romans 3:24 is a term that emerged from the slave world and meant “liberation through payment of a price.”2 In the second and first centuries B.C., “redemption” often referred to the “ransoming” of prisoners of war, slaves, and condemned criminals. Paul thus presented “Christ’s death as a ‘ransom,’ a ‘payment’ that takes the place of the penalty for sins ‘owed’ to God by all people of God.”3 Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45, NIV, italics mine).

Jesus’ death is foundational for all redemption talk in the New Testament. Humans are in spiritual captivity, and the only way we can be freed or redeemed is if a price is paid for us. This redemption required nothing less than the death of the Messiah.

Romans 3:19-26 is embedded in a section of Paul’s letter in which the apostle unpacked the characteristics of the gospel of God’s grace. Some Christians consider the Romans 3 text the most important passage the apostle wrote.4 After Paul in verse 23 proclaimed the whole world, whether Jew or Gentile, guilty before God because of sin, he used a legal term “justified” (v. 24) to paint a picture of a courtroom in which God, the judge, pronounces the guilty sinner innocent. How can this be? Why do the guilty go free? Paul indicated the mode of being made right with God as “freely by his grace,” and then followed that with the phrase “through the redemption.” These phrases help explain the costly means by which this acquitting verdict is made possible.

While the Old Testament described people redeemed from serious social situations such as debt, captivity, slavery, exile, and potential death sentences, Jesus redeemed us from the greatest threat of all—sin and spiritual death. Not only did He deliver us from the greatest threat of all—sin and spiritual death. Not only did He deliver us from our sins and the curse of the law, but He also rescued us from all the ill effects of the fall. In addition, an already/not yet aspect applies to redemption. All of God’s people are waiting for the “day of redemption” when we will be made perfect. This includes our bodies and the whole groaning creation (Rom. 8:18-23; Eph. 1:14; 4:30). While we are in these temporal, eroding bodies, the Holy Spirit within us is the seal, guarantee, and firstfruits of our final redemption.

We have been redeemed from sin and its lethal effects. The cost was Christ’s blood (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The writer of Hebrews echoed the same idea in saying that Jesus “entered the Most Holy Place once for all ... by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12, NIV). In Romans 3:24-25, Paul directly connected...
This redemption to the blood of Christ.

Christ’s redemption carries a final yet huge practical implication for believers. Christ has undeniable rights over His purchase. We belong to Him. Jesus has absolute lordship over the church and each Christian. Paul reminded the elders in Ephesus that their pastoral care of the church should be carried out with the utmost seriousness because Jesus purchased the church with His own blood (Acts 20:28).

Because of the huge price Christ paid to buy us back through His death on the cross, we must exercise discipline and self-control by not becoming slaves to anything or anybody on this earth. Paul emphasized that fact to the Corinthian Christians by offering a twofold reason why they should not engage in sexual immorality: 1) “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own”; 2) “You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The reality of our costly redemption prohibits this type of immoral behavior.

Fireworks can mark the celebration of our country’s political freedom. But the fireworks fade as the celebration passes. The cross, however, remains as the enduring symbol of spiritual freedom, where Christ paid our penalty and we were redeemed by His all-sufficient sacrifice.

1. Romans sets forth Paul’s “Gospel of Redemption,” and can be outlined as follows: I. The Need for Redemption (1:18-3:20); II. The Provision for Redemption (3:21-8:39); III. The Challenge of Israel within Redemption (chaps. 9-11); and IV. The Practical Application of Redemption (chaps. 12-16).
4. See Robert H. Mounce, Romans in The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1995), 114. Also see Moo, NICNT, 229-330. Also, this text in Donald Grey Barnhouse’s Bible had a heart traced over it as he said, “I am convinced today, after these many years of Bible study, that these verses are the most important in the whole Bible.” See D. G. Barnhouse, God’s Remedy, God’s River, vol. 2 (Fincastle, VA: Scripture Truth Book Co., n.d.), 6.

Paul N. Jackson is associate professor of Christian Studies, Union University, Jackson, Tennessee.