

Metaphors of Salvation



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom. 2:1–29, 3:19–26, 2 Cor. 5:18–21, 1 John 4:7–11.*

Memory Text: “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished” (*Romans 3:25, NIV*).

Key Thought: To summarize some of the ways that the New Testament interprets the death of Christ.

No one image, or one idea, is grand enough to capture the full meaning of Christ's death. Some people have argued that Christ's death was a ransom paid to liberate us from evil powers; others claim that it was a sublime revelation of God's love, one that transforms us. Some say that it was an expiatory sacrifice and removes sin as a barrier between us and God; some insist that it was a reconciling act, others that it was a declaration of acquittal. The truth is that the death of Christ is all of these, and much more. It's not possible to bring the full meaning of Christ's death under one all-encompassing concept, although some images are central, such as sacrificial substitution. This week we'll look at some of the key images used to express the wonderful gift we've been given through Jesus' death on the cross.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 29.*

Redemption

Read Mark 10:45; Galatians 3:13; Ephesians 1:7; and 1 Peter 1:18, 19. From these texts, how do you understand the concept of “redemption”?

Redemption is deliverance from debt or slavery through the payment of a ransom, and it’s an image used in the New Testament to interpret Christ’s death. In this thinking, the whole world became a prisoner of sin, and the law was the gatekeeper (*Gal. 3:22, 23*). As slaves of sin, humans were heading to eternal death (*Rom. 6:6, 23*). The debt could be paid only by relinquishing their own life. Then Christ came and paid the price for our redemption, making life available for all who believe in Him. Such persons “used to be slaves to sin” but have now “been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness” (*Rom. 6:17, 18, NIV*).

Christ also redeemed us from the “curse of the law” (*Gal. 3:13, NIV*). The curse of the law was the claim it made against the life of those who violated it (*vs. 10*). The law itself could not save us from its sentence of death, because it could not give us back life (*vs. 21*); it simply provided the legal basis for the death of the culprit. God’s solution was revealed when He “sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (*Gal. 4:4, 5, NIV*).

Christ also “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (*Titus 2:14, NIV*). Redemption, therefore, includes the process of sanctification, the purification of our lives. This presupposes that on the cross Christ paid our debt and granted us forgiveness of sin (*Eph. 1:7*) and gave us the gift of justification (*Rom. 3:24*). In other words, free from the condemnation of our sin through the gift Christ bought for us (the forgiveness of our sins), we were justified by faith in Christ.

God could not ignore sin by pretending that it never existed. He satisfied His own moral demands by paying the ransom Himself. He bought back the right of existence for the human race and the whole planet. Whether humans acknowledge it or not, we all belong to God.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:20. What impact should our redemption through the blood of Christ have on our daily life? What is the value of a gift if the one who is offered it never accepts it?

Reconciliation

Read carefully 2 Corinthians 5:18–21. What does it say about reconciliation?

Reconciliation is the restoration of peaceful relationships between individuals or groups once at enmity. Usually a mediator or negotiator is needed. This practice was used by Paul to explain the Cross.

First, God took the initiative in reconciling sinners to Himself; in other words, despite our sin, God still loved us.

Second, God used a Mediator through whom reconciliation was possible. He “reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Cor. 5:18, NIV); He “was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (vs. 19, NIV). This implies an unbridgeable distance between God and humans, one that required a Mediator.

Third, the object of reconciliation is defined as “us” and the “world.” God “reconciled us to himself through Christ” (vs. 18, NIV). The verb is in the past, indicating that the action it expresses is complete. This means that believers enjoy the benefits and fullness of reconciliation right now. Concerning the world, we read that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (vs. 19, NIV). The context indicates that the reconciliation of the world is still in progress; it is not, as it is with believers, a completed event.

Fourth, reconciliation as a process is formed by two divine actions. One is the divine act of reconciliation on the cross, defined as “not counting men’s sins against them” (vs. 19, NIV). Sin was the barrier that made it impossible for God to reconcile humans to Himself. Hence, we were by nature objects of His wrath. But He decided to allow His love to flow freely toward us by removing the barrier of sin. From the divine perspective, reconciliation is the removal of that barrier. The other aspect of reconciliation is the ministry of reconciliation (vs. 18, NIV), the proclamation of the message of reconciliation (vs. 19, NIV) entrusted to us. “We are ambassadors for Christ” (vs. 20), and as such it is God Himself who is “making his appeal through us. . . . Be reconciled to God” (vs. 20, NIV). It is through this ministry that reconciliation reaches its ideal goal, which is the end of human animosity against God.

Is there anyone you need to be reconciled with? If so, how can understanding the reconciliation wrought by Jesus in your behalf help you to be reconciled to others?

Justification

Justification is, fundamentally, a legal term that refers to the acquittal of someone accused of a crime but who is found innocent in a court. This concept also was used in the New Testament to explore the significance of the Cross.

Why does Paul contrast justification by faith with obedience to the law, and how does this help us understand justification? (*Rom. 3:19–24*).

A few points can be noted from these verses: First, the legal image implies that humans have been charged with a crime. In this particular case, humans have been found guilty as charged; that is to say, they are all under the condemnation of the law (*Romans 2*).

Second, God has provided for humans a way out of their predicament. “Now,” with the coming of Christ, “a righteousness from God, apart from law,” that is to say, not determined by our obedience to the law, “has been made known,” or revealed (*Rom. 3:21, NIV*). Paul explains that “this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (*vs. 22, NIV*). Righteousness designates here not simply the divine declaration of acquittal but particularly our participation by faith in God’s saving deed in Christ.

Third, this justification is intended for both Jews and Gentiles (*vss. 22, 29*). God does not make distinctions between peoples: All are sinners, and all are being justified “freely by his grace” (*vs. 24, NIV*). Hence, the solution to the human predicament is the justification that comes by faith to all who believe. This gift of salvation is accompanied by the reception of the Spirit, who enables us to walk in newness of life (*Rom. 6:4; Gal. 3:2, 3*).

Fourth, God’s decision is justifiable through Christ’s redemptive work. We have here the combination of two images, redemption and justification, that describe and provide a legal basis for God’s decision to justify those who accept the righteousness of Christ (*Rom. 4:3–6*). God can do the unimaginable because Christ took our sin and died in our place (*2 Cor. 5:21*).

Read again Romans 3:19–24. Apply the message there to yourself, personally. What can you take away, right now, for yourself that can help you realize how you can be right with God?

Expiatory Sacrifice

Read Romans 3:25, 26. How does Paul explain what Christ's sacrifice did for us?

The specific use of the word *sacrifice* (*NIV*; “propitiation,” *KJV*) to designate the death of Christ is not symbolic or metaphorical but expresses the reality of what happened; Christ *sacrificed* Himself for us. The Old Testament sacrifices were mere reflections of this true and genuine sacrifice, which sits at the core of what God has done for us.

First, this sacrifice was provided by God Himself to restore our relationship with Him (*Rom. 3:25*). What we could not do, God did for us in the person of His Son. Second, this was an act of substitution. Christ is described as sinless, without any defect; yet, He was offered as a sin offering (*Rom. 8:3, 2 Cor. 5:21*). He bore our sin on the tree, and died for us and in our place (*1 Pet. 2:21–24*). By taking our sin upon Himself, He cleansed us from it and brought us back to unity with God.

Third, Christ's sacrifice is propitiatory in the sense that it liberated us from the wrath of God. In Romans Paul introduces the sacrifice of Christ after establishing that the world was under sin and legally under the condemnation of God (*Romans 1–3*). The wrath of God was already making itself present against the injustices and perversions of humans (*Rom. 1:18*). Through the sacrifice of Christ we are liberated from that wrath, and God's love reaches us in salvation. Propitiation does not mean that Christ persuaded the Father to love us; it means that Christ's sacrifice made it possible for God's love to reach us. Christ experienced God's wrath against sin so that we don't have to experience it ourselves. Consequently, the Cross is not only the place where God's love is revealed but also the place where His wrath against sin was manifested.

Fourth, the sacrifice of Christ expresses, actualizes, and provides the legal foundation for God's will to save us. Our redemption and reconciliation would not have been possible without the sacrificial blood of Christ (*Acts 20:28, Col. 1:20, Rev. 5:9*). It is because of His death on the cross as the only and unique sacrificial victim that God is able to justify those who believe in Christ (*Rom. 5:9*). By condemning sin in Christ, God demonstrated that He is righteous when justifying those who believe in Christ (*Rom. 3:26*).

Display of God's Love

The engine that configured the plan of salvation and put it into effect was divine love, the very essence of God (*1 John 4:8*). Every aspect of God's redemptive work is embedded in the divine matrix of love. God sent the Son to die for us because He loved the world (*John 3:16*). The Son came to this world to give His life for us because He loves both the Father (*John 14:31*) and us (*John 13:1*). Those who are united by faith to Christ love God (*James 2:5*), Jesus (*John 14:21*), and one another (*1 John 3:11*). In fact, the life of obedience to the commandments of God is our expression of love to Christ for what He has done for us (*1 John 5:3*). The whole life and death of Christ was a magnificent display of God's character, the most sublime revelation of love.

What should be our reaction to the display of God's love in the death of Christ? *1 John 4:7–11*.

The significance of God's love, as revealed in the sacrifice of Christ, is better comprehended when placed in the context of the cosmic conflict. Satan's charges against God cast doubts in the minds of heavenly beings concerning the nature of God. Was God indeed a loving, self-sacrificing God, as He claimed to be, or did He have a selfish nature hidden under the appearance of self-denial? The cross of Christ dispelled, forever, all doubts concerning the character of God. That the Creator willingly chose to become human and suffer and die on a cross in order to save a race that did not deserve it revealed that God's love was beyond the full comprehension of the heavenly intelligences. The unselfish nature of the unfathomable sacrifice is precisely displayed in the fact that what God did through Christ was done for the benefit of others, not for His own personal benefit or gain.

The manifestation of God's love on the cross of Christ served also to dispel humans' misconceptions concerning the nature of God. "By presenting Jesus as the representative of the Father, we shall be able to dispel the shadow that Satan has cast upon our pathway, in order that we shall not see the mercy and inexpressible love of God as manifested in Jesus Christ. Look at the cross of Calvary. It is a standing pledge of the boundless love, the measureless mercy of the heavenly Father."—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 156.

Read again 1 John 4:7–11 and contrast what it says to your own life and relationships with others. In what ways can you better manifest the love talked about here? What things are standing in your way, and how can they be removed?

Further Study: Reconciliation: “Reconciliation means that every barrier between the soul and God is removed, and that the sinner realizes what the pardoning love of God means. By reason of the sacrifice made by Christ for fallen men, God can justly pardon the transgressor who accepts the merits of Christ. Christ was the channel through which the mercy, love, and righteousness might flow from the heart of God to the heart of the sinner.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 396.

Wrath of God: “Christ was to take the wrath of God which in justice should fall upon man. He became a refuge for man, and although man was indeed a criminal, deserving the wrath of God, yet he could by faith in Christ run into the refuge provided and be safe. In the midst of death there was life if man chose to accept it.”—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, February 24, 1874.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Of the various images talked about this week, which ones can you relate to the best? Why? In class, talk about the different images and share with one another the reasons for your choice.
- 2 Dwell on this idea of reconciliation. What can we learn from human accounts of reconciliation that can help us better understand it as a metaphor for salvation?
- 3 In what ways is the Cross the greatest manifestation and expression of God’s love? What comfort can we draw from the Cross about the nature of God that can help sustain us during hard times?
- 4 God’s wrath against sin just couldn’t be turned off; what should that tell us about sin’s nature? In other words, why didn’t God just forget about sin instead of having to pour out His wrath against it?

Summary: The Bible employs different images to help us grasp Christ’s death. Redemption indicates that His death liberates us from the power of sin. His death restores a peaceful relationship with God; it reconciles us by overcoming our rebellion. Through the death of Christ we are declared innocent before the heavenly court because He died in our place as a substitute. His death on the cross is the place where God shouts and tells us, “Look, this is how much I love you!”

Conquering the Deceiver

by HEATHER TREDOUX

Justinia stood outside the big tent in Swaziland, listening intently to the speaker. She wanted to go in and listen, but she was afraid. Someone had said that these meetings were sponsored by satanists. She needed God's help, but her fears held her back.

As she listened, she could find nothing that pointed to Satan. The sermons and even the songs were straight from the Bible. She took a deep breath, entered the tent, and sat down.

After that Justinia never missed a meeting. *How could this be bad?* She wondered as she listened. Bravely she approached the speaker, David Tembe, and asked him to visit her home. "The spirits of our ancestors are troubling us," she told him.

When the pastor visited the family, they told their troubles. "The ancestors are angry with us because we don't have money to hold a feast for them. We hear strange noises, like a telephone ringing, but we don't own a telephone. At night we hear the sound of running footsteps on the metal roof when no one is there, and lately stones are being hurled at our front door."

The family explained that they had consulted a *sangoma* (witchdoctor), who declared that the ancestors were angry and told them to slaughter a goat or an ox to appease the spirits. But the family had no money to buy one. When the family returned home, they found a small green snake with black markings near their front door. They knew that this snake meant that the ancestors had come to visit them. The snake would disappear and reappear, changing color and growing larger. The family was terrified.

The evangelist told the family that God is their only hope. He read the Bible story of the serpent that deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), and then he explained that God is more powerful than Satan and has conquered Satan already. They needed only to trust in God.

The family sighed with relief and asked the evangelist to pray for them. They knelt together and pleaded with God to take control.

During the closing meeting, Justinia shared her testimony. "We have been troubled and threatened by demons, but when Pastor Tembe prayed, God sent away the demons, and they have not come back. We lived in darkness and fear, but now we live in the light of God!"

Our mission offerings help people around the world find the light of God that shines into their sin-darkened lives. Thank you for doing your part to make world evangelism possible.

HEATHER TREDOUX is fund-raising for the 4,000 AIDS orphans in the Maluti Adventist Hospital service area in Lesotho. Swaziland and Lesotho are small countries in southern Africa.