

# Redemption

So good to see you guys today. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to Romans 7. I missed you last week, but hope you guys enjoyed having Jason Hayes here with us. I really enjoyed my time over at Hope Fellowship, some great people over there. I will warn you though, I might expect a little more from you guys as a result of being over there. So at Hope, if you say something that resonates with them, they let you know about it. Like verbally, with their words. They're not much for head-nodding and "mmm"-ing over at Hope. Over here at City Church most of us are a little *quieter* during our teachings. Usually, if I make it halfway through the sermon and nobody's asleep, I consider myself to be pretty much killing it. So all I'm saying today, is that if you hear something this morning that resonates with you, you are welcome to acknowledge that verbally. That's it. Not necessarily because I just want affirmation or anything like that, but simply because it communicates that what we're doing here is remembering and celebrating things that are of incredible importance. Fair enough? I know most of us probably still won't, but just wanted you guys to know you had the permission to. So I'll just leave that there.

But it's going to be very important that you stay engaged this morning, because we've got a new series that is very much *theological* in its focus. The teaching series we're jumping into today is titled *It is Finished*. Those words, as many of you probably know, were some of Jesus' final words from the cross. So in many ways, **this is simply a series about the cross**. And one reason for this series is **the cross is what makes Christianity unique among the world religions**. In most other religions, the emphasis is on the religious leader's *teachings* (what they *said*), or on their teacher's *life* (*how* they lived). Christianity stands alone in placing an extraordinary emphasis on our religious leader's *death*. **In other world religions, the leader's death made them an unfortunate martyr. But to followers of Jesus claim something altogether different about his death. They claim that Jesus' death actually accomplished something.**

The emphasis placed on the cross throughout the bible is *overwhelming*. As you read through the gospels—the four early biographies of Jesus in the bible—what you'll find is that in general, the narrative moves pretty rapidly from one scene to the next, skipping entire days and weeks at a time. But then when they get to the crucifixion, they all seem to go into slow motion: they start recording every vivid detail. One author described the gospel narratives as accounts of Jesus' death with really long introductions.<sup>1</sup> **The writers of the gospels saw Jesus' death as essential to understanding what Jesus was all about.** But the emphasis on the cross doesn't stop with the gospel writers. In many ways, the rest of the *New Testament* just spends time unpacking and working out the *implications* of the cross. Such that another author suggests that "the entire New Testament, in many ways, is a commentary on the cross."

But there is something that makes teaching a series on the cross a little *tricky*: and that's a little thing called *familiarity*. The cross is really *familiar* to a lot of people. For instance, the cross has become the universal symbol for "Christian." We plaster the cross all over church logos and jewelry and horribly designed Christian t-shirts. We hang ornate versions of the cross all over our church buildings. The cross is very familiar to a lot of people. And in some ways maybe that's a good thing. But it does make teaching on the cross a little difficult. Because like we've said before on Sundays, **sometimes being familiar with**

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*.

**something can breed *indifference* towards it.** For example, if I was teaching a series about the end times or about a book like Song of Solomon, our ears might perk up a little, because we don't feel like we're familiar with those things—there's some curiosity motivating us there. But in a church setting, when someone starts talking about the cross, the tendency is to go "oh yeah, I know what this is all about."

But I don't know that all of us do. **I think while a lot of us may know *that the cross is significant, we may struggle to articulate exactly *why* it's significant.*** Here's what I mean: as I've pastored people over the years, I've found that if you ask the average follower of Jesus why Jesus died, you'll get a few different common answers. Usually it's things like "Jesus died to save us." Or, "Jesus died to forgive us." Or "Jesus died for our sins." And let me be clear—all of those are absolutely *true*. But what I've also found is that if you press people to get more detail than that, a lot of us start grasping for words a little. It seems like **many people struggle to put into words exactly what was happening when Jesus died on the cross.**

All of this brings us full circle back to Jesus' words "it is finished." Because **not only did Jesus' followers claim that his death accomplished something, Jesus actually believed *himself* to be accomplishing something too.** Hence delivering a phrase like "it is finished" as he died. But a statement like "it is finished" raises a question: ***what was finished, exactly?*** What was it that Jesus believed he was accomplishing in dying? And that's what we want to explore in this series. ***What was it that was finished?***

And in order to answer that, we're going to be *looking* at the cross from a number of different angles. **Part of what makes the cross so *beautiful* and so *complex* is that it isn't actually about any *one thing*. It's actually about a *lot of things, all at once*.** And to truly appreciate what happened there, it's helpful to try to see it from many different angles. In that way, the cross has something in common with a good movie. Now, let me first clarify: if when I said "good movie," you went "oh, like *Twilight!*" No. Just, no. If there are werewolves or vampires involved, generally speaking, you can scratch it off the good movie list. When I say a good movie I mean a film that makes you *think*. So I'm talking about movies by directors like Terrence Malick, Christopher Nolan, and even more recently someone like Jordan Peele. (Anybody seen *Us*, yet? I want to go. But I have one kid and another on the way, which means I never get to go see movies ever again). But I'm talking about *good* movies like that—movies that, after you watch them once, you *can't wait* to go back and watch them again. I'm talking about the types of movies that the more you watch them, the more you pick up on and appreciate things you may not have noticed or appreciated before.

That's what good art does, and I would argue that's similar to what the *cross* should do in our minds and imaginations as followers of Jesus. It should be that **the more you see the cross from all its various angles and vantage points, the more incredible it becomes to us. Growing as a follower of Jesus isn't about moving *past* the cross, as much as it's about moving deeper and deeper into the realities of the cross.** So what we're going to do for the next several weeks leading up to Easter is that **each week, we're going to attempt to look at the cross from a slightly different vantage point.** And the hope is that by the end of the series, we will gain a newfound appreciation and even *fascination* with the cross and all that happened there. Does that make sense?

Okay, so today the angle we're going to look at it from is something called *redemption*. Can you say *redemption*? Each week during this series, we'll give you a word, and then a sentence summary for what

we mean by that word. So here's how I would summarize **redemption in a sentence: we were enslaved to the power of sin, and Jesus brought us out.** That's what we mean by *redemption*. Now, biblically speaking, we find this idea in a lot of different places. But we'll start with one passage that I think at least describes the situation *requiring* redemption. That passage is Romans 7. Take a look at this with me, starting in v. 18:

*[18] For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. [21] So I find it to be a law [in other words, an irrefutable reality] that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.*

Okay, so in his own tongue-twistery kind of way, Paul has just described something that I think an awful lot of people have experienced at some point in their lives. And that's that there have been times that we knew the *good* thing to do, even when we knew the *right* thing to do—but we lacked the *ability* to do it. He's describing sin as this *gravitational pull* towards things he knows aren't good and aren't right. That's part of what the bible means when it talks about about **sin. Not just things we do, but a power that we are under apart from Jesus.**

Somewhere along the line, I think sin got the reputation of being just some arbitrary list of things God just doesn't like for us to do. I think that's what a lot of people tend to think. But I want you to see that that's not really what sin is. Here's how author Francis Spufford unpacks it. We've used this quote before, and I hope you'll excuse the language, but I think the quote is so very helpful:

*What I and most other believers understand by the word [sin] has got very little to do with yummy transgression. For us, it refers to something **much more like the human tendency, the human propensity, to f\*\*\* up.** [] Or let's add one more word: The human propensity to f\*\*\* things up, because what we're talking about here is not just our tendency to lurch and stumble and screw up by **accident**, our passive role as agents of entropy. It's our **active inclination to break stuff**—"stuff" here including moods, promises, relationships we care about and our own well-being and other people's, as well as material objects whose high gloss positively seems to invite a big fat scratch. Now, I hope, we're on common ground. In the end, **almost everyone recognizes this as one of the truths about themselves.***

Like his language or not, I think his ideas help us gain a better grasp on what sin is. **Sin is not just a list of things we want that we should try not to want.** It goes far deeper than that. **Sin is actually a power that we are under,** apart from Jesus. There is an interview that filmmaker Woody Allen did with Walter Isaacson back in the day that I think demonstrates this idea perfectly. In the interview, Woody Allen is being *grilled* on his relationship with Soon Yi-Previn. For those of you that don't know the backstory, Woody Allen dated model Mia Farrow for about twelve years. Soon Yi-Previn was Farrow's adopted daughter. At one point during their relationship, Mia discovered pornographic photos of her daughter in Woody Allen's briefcase. And eventually, Woody went on to date and then marry, practically, his step-daughter. If you're thinking "gross," that is the *correct* response. But in this interview, Isaacson is just *grilling* Woody Allen about how wrong, and gross, that all was. And nearly backed into a corner,

Woody Allen delivers this iconic line as justification for all of what he did: “the heart wants what it wants.”<sup>2</sup> Now, do you hear what he’s saying there? He’s talking about this relationship like it was a power that exerted its control over him. That, in many ways, is what sin *is*. It’s a power. And that doesn’t mean that we or Woody Allen aren’t morally responsible for it. But it does mean that sin goes much deeper than just conscious decisions that we make.

So all of this is why *often*, when the bible describes sin, it uses the metaphor of *slavery* to depict it. That’s a way of saying that sin is not just bad decisions we make but a *power* that *we are under* apart from Jesus. Paul even uses that language in setting up *this very idea* in Romans 7. Up in v. 14 before what we just read, he says, “~~I am...sold as a slave to sin.~~” The King James Version of the bible actually says “I am sold as a slave under sin,” which I think is even more vivid. According to Paul, sin is a power that we are *under* apart from Jesus. And Romans 7 isn’t the *only* place we see this idea—it’s actually all throughout the New Testament. I’ll show you what I mean:

- Jesus, in John 8: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.*”
- Paul, in Romans 6: “*We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be **enslaved to sin.***”
- Paul, in Titus 3: “*For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, **slaves** to various passions and pleasures...*”
- Peter, in 2 Peter 2: “*They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever **overcomes** a person, **to that he is enslaved.***”

So *slavery* is a common metaphor in the bible for what sin is. Now, when New Testament authors use that word “slavery,” it comes with a very loaded history. So think about if today, I used the phrase “twin towers.” Sure, those words have a meaning of their own, but it’s nearly impossible to hear them today without thinking of a very specific series of events that took place on September 11, 2001. For the biblical authors, it was a lot like that with a word like *slavery*. That word was meant to call to mind a specific event from *Israel’s* history—the story of the *Exodus*—when God rescued his people *out of slavery* in Egypt. Throughout the bible, the biblical authors use that story as a framework for understanding *our own* situation when it comes to sin and its power over us. From the bible’s standpoint, **the Israelites were slaves to Pharaoh, and we are slaves to sin. And we both need to be rescued out.**

So maybe at this point, you’re here and you’re thinking “okay—I’m fine to admit that I sometimes do things I shouldn’t do. I may even have a tendency towards *destructive* things. But I don’t think it’s bad enough that I need someone to *rescue me out*. Like, isn’t this something I can just overcome with some positive thinking and better decision-making?” But this is precisely where the idea of sin as slavery comes into play. **If you are a slave, you can’t get yourself out of slavery just by *thinking differently about your situation*.** That’s not how slavery works. You don’t walk up to a someone in chains and go, “you know, bud, if you just thought more *positively* about yourself, you could walk right out of these chains. If you would just try to believe in yourself, these chains would just fall right off!” That’s not how that works. **You do not have the ability within yourself to set yourself free.**

Anyone who’s familiar with the twelve-step program knows this. Think about one of the *first* things they tell you about recovery. The second step is that you need a “higher...*what?* Power.” You need a *higher*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,160439,00.html>

*power.* Now in the program, they're not even advocating for Jesus *specifically*. But still they know that a person can not overcome the gravitational pull towards destructive things by themselves, in their own power. **If you believe that all you need to achieve freedom is your own power, your own intellect, your own positivity—you're actually the *most* enslaved of anybody. Because you don't realize that you're enslaved.** You're in *denial*. First step to solving any problem is *what? Admitting that there is one.* **If you won't admit that you're enslaved, you'll never find true freedom. You cannot think or will your way out of slavery. You have to be *purchased* out of it.**

And that is precisely the language Jesus uses to describe one thing his death was all about. Take a look with me at Mark 10:45 on the screen:

*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to **give his life as a ransom for many.***

Jesus says that one thing his death would be about is that it would be a “ransom” for those in need of it. That word *ransom* is literally the word for a price paid to purchase a slave or a prisoner *out of* their bondage. Jesus says his death was somehow accomplishing *that* for us. There was something about Jesus' death on the cross that *redeemed us*—that *purchased us out* and *set us free* from the power of sin. So how did that work exactly?

Well, there's this line in the opening pages of Genesis—in the story of Cain and Abel—where God says to Cain, “*sin is crouching at your door, and its desire is to have you.*” So here, the *power* of sin is imagined like an untamed animal, waiting outside someone's door, out for blood. It's a way of saying that **the powers of sin in the world will not be satisfied until they entirely annihilate.** They may promise you *life*, but what they want is your *death*. And they won't be stopped until they accomplish that. Anyone who's seen a friend or family member succumb to any type of addiction knows this all too well. Addiction is not satisfied until it has entirely consumed a person's life. Sin in general is much the same way. It won't be satisfied short of a death—physical, spiritual and otherwise. And so what Jesus does is offer up his death in the place of ours.

To wrap your mind around this concept, think of the great scene at the beginning of the Hunger Games—a lot of movie references today—I promise I'm not getting any product placement money from this. Although, Hunger Games, if you're listening—we do have a building that needs renovating. But think of the movie Hunger Games. There's that scene where Katniss's younger sister is chosen for the Games, and Katniss immediately comes forward and does the unthinkable. She says “I volunteer as *tribute*.” So what's happening there is that she knows this cruel, brutal empire Panem is out for blood, by way of entertainment. And she knows they won't be satisfied until they essentially have condemned someone from District 12 to death in the Games. And so Katniss, knowing all that, offers up her own life in place of her sisters. She knows that's the only way to *quench* the all-consuming power of the empire. It's this really gripping moment in the book and the movie. But I think it's gripping because it's an echo of the story that we are all *made for*.

Because at the cross, in a far more profound and real-life way, *Jesus* does the unthinkable: he offers up his *own* life as a *ransom*. As a “tribute,” as it were, not just for one person but for everyone and anyone who would accept it as being for them. In a way, he offers the powers of sin exactly what they're out for: *death*. His *own death*. But *through* that death, he makes a way for his people's sins to be paid for and for

them to go *free*. He offers up *his* death for *our* life, for our *freedom*. That's one thing that was *finished* on the cross.

Now don't hear that wrong: sin doesn't *defeat* Jesus—we know that because he doesn't *stay dead*. That's what we'll talk about in more detail the final week of this series. But he does *offer up* his death as a *purchase* of his people *out* of the *power* of sin. That's part of what makes the cross such good news. Because it means for you and me—the moment we become followers of Jesus, we are given *freedom* over the things that enslave us. We become free from the *power* of sin. We do not *have* to yield to its power and its influence anymore as followers of Jesus. I can think of no more explicit description of this than Romans 6:14:

*For sin shall **no longer be your master**, because you are not under the law, but **under grace**.*

That's it. That's what redemption means for us. // But at the same time, here's the problem: we don't always *remember* that. **Even though we have in fact been set free from the power of sin, that doesn't mean that we always live as if we have. Just because we are redeemed doesn't mean we always remember we're redeemed.** We are so very quick to forget, are we not? So often we find ourselves forgetting, and living as if we *haven't* been rescued from the power of our sin.

You can actually hear it in the way we think and talk about things we struggle with:

- “I *can't* go into a store at the mall and not spend too much money.”
- “I *can't* stop looking at porn.”
- “I *can't* stop sabotaging relationships with other people who love me.”
- “I *can't* stop eating too much, drinking too much.”
- “I *can't* stop counting calories, hating what I see in the mirror.”
- “I *can't* stop being impatient with my wife or my roommates.”

We so often *forget* about the freedom we've been given. And we're not the only ones who do that. The Israelites—after they were rescued out of slavery in Egypt—they *also* forgot. That's why, over and over again, God sends them leaders and prophets to call them to *remember* their redemption. He knows that they—and we too—are so quick to forget. And so he calls us both to *remember*.

Now, a quick word on that term, “remembering.” When we hear that we are to *remember* something, we think it means “think about.” We think it means sit and think about. And that's *part* of what is meant by *remember* in the bible, but that's far from *all* it means. When the bible calls us to *remember* that we've been rescued out of the power of sin, it's saying “yeah, *think* about it, call it to mind—but also, *act in accordance* with it.” So right now we are doing potty training with our son Whit. Partly because he's past due for it and partly because we've got another kid on the way and the thought of two kids in diapers at the same time stresses us out so much. So not a day goes by when we aren't having the conversation with Whit where we go: “*remember*, we're using the *potty* now. So if you have to go, tell us and we'll go to the bathroom.” Now, when we tell him to “remember,” are we just saying “sit around and contemplate the realities of using the potty?” Not really, right? I mean sure, we want him to think about it. But we want him to *think* about it, and then *act in accordance* with it. That's much closer to what the Scriptures mean when they call us to *remember* that Jesus has redeemed us out of the power of our sin. They mean to *call it to mind*, so that we *act in accordance* with it.

**If you are a follower of Jesus—if you have been redeemed by Jesus’ death on the cross, you absolutely can live in the freedom you’ve been given.** Sure, maybe not immediately. Maybe not perfectly. But you absolutely *can* experience freedom. That’s what Jesus, in many ways, came to do in and for us. That’s part of what was *finished* on the cross. So what we’re called to do is *remember* that reality about ourselves.

So in light of everything we’ve discussed, let me just close by asking a practical *question* to each of us: **is there anything you feel enslaved to?** It could be any variety of things. Maybe it’s an outright addiction: porn, sex, food, drink, a substance of some sort. Maybe you feel enslaved to one of those and like there’s no way out. Maybe for you it’s bitterness and unforgiveness. Your life just feels like it is being eaten away by a resentment towards another person or group of people and you can’t seem to shake it. Maybe for you it’s a romantic relationship—somebody you’re seeing or dating. And deep down, you know that relationship is no good for either of you, but you just can’t seem to bring yourself to break it off. Maybe you feel enslaved to a certain destructive way of thinking about or talking about yourself. You fill in the blank—it’d be impossible for me to know what it is for every person in this room. but I know the chances are quite a few of us in the room *feel* enslaved to *something*.

And if you *do* feel enslaved to something, like we said, there’s one of two things happening there. **It might be that you feel enslaved because you *are* enslaved.** As we read in 2 Peter earlier, “whatever *overcomes* a person, to that they are *enslaved*.” So it might be that you feel enslaved, because *sin has you under its power*. If that’s you, **I want you to hear me say today that Jesus can purchase you out.** You do not have to be enslaved to whatever that thing is. You can walk in freedom *from* it. Jesus went to the cross to make that possible. So maybe today is the day that you let him do that. Maybe today is the day you say “I’m done being enslaved to sin and today I want the freedom Jesus offers.” **It will take time to learn what that looks like and realize its practical applications, but it is possible.** So if you think that’s you, we’d love few things more than to have a conversation with you about that. Come talk to me, one of the other leaders, somebody you came with today about that. We’d love to tell you about how Jesus did that for us and how he can do that for you too.

Or, **maybe you’re here and you feel enslaved to something, and you *aren’t actually* enslaved—it’s just that you’ve forgotten you’re *free*.** Like the Israelites, you’ve simply forgotten what Jesus has made possible for you. So maybe today it’s not so much that you need Jesus to set you free again—you just need to remember and live out of the freedom that is already yours in him. Doing that could look like a number of things. It might look like immersing yourself more regularly in the Scriptures, where you can be reminded of the freedom you’ve been given. It might look like *confessing*—admitting the things that you’re allowing to master you to God and to others who care about you. Sin so often loses so much of its power when you bring it into the light. It might be that you need to process with your LifeGroup this week about practical ways for them and you to *remind* you of the freedom you have. Or, it might just be that you’re trying to *will* your way into freedom in your own effort, and today you need to reset by asking the Spirit to accomplish it in and through you. One way or another, maybe you just need to *remember*—call to mind and begin to act in accordance with—what Jesus has already made possible.

Wherever you’re at this morning, I want you to know that freedom is possible. Maybe you won’t see it happen instantly or perfectly, but it is possible. And I want every single one of us to experience that freedom. Because what it means to be redeemed. That’s what was finished on the cross.

Let's pray together.