

Jesus' Redemption Tour

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Isaiah 50:4-9a; Romans 5:12, 15-18; Matthew 27:15-23

When it comes to the religion of NC basketball, you might say I grew up in an interfaith family. My sisters and I pulled for Carolina, and my mother pulled for Duke.

And whenever the RAs--the mission program for boys at my home church in Greensboro--came to Winston-Salem to see a Wake Forest game, we pulled for the Deacons.

Later, my daughter graduated from Georgia Tech, further complicating my ACC loyalties.

But this year, when Carolina made it to the Final Four and then the national championship, there was no question I would be pulling for the Tarheels, especially as they sought to redeem themselves from last year's crushing, final-seconds loss to Villanova.

As the season began, the Tarheels weren't expected to win the NCAA tournament or even the ACC, but they did. And not with a bunch of NBA-bound talent but with a lot of grit and gumption and finding a way to win in the clutch, game after nail-biting game. Much of that determination was fueled by what the team christened their "redemption tour." As Theo Pinson texted his teammates at the start of the NCAA tournament, "It's called 'redemption'."

Stirred by his challenge and their own painful memories of loss, the Tarheels chased and clawed their way to redemption until in the end, as by a miracle of grace, they got it. And whether

you're a Deacon or a Blue Devil or a Yellow Jacket, how can you not celebrate a victory as surprising and sweet as this?

It did strike me as strange that a word right out of the Bible--*redemption*--was fueling a team's ascent to basketball stardom. After all, redemption is not a post-modern, millennial's hash tag. It is an ancient word drawn from the practice of purchasing a slave's freedom or paying the ransom for a prisoner of war. To redeem such a soul was to pay the price to set him or her free. And that same word, *redemption*, is one of many images the New Testament fires off like flares in the night to illuminate the meaning of Jesus' cross. As Jesus says in both Matthew and Mark, "The Son of man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many."

But the redemption Jesus wins at the cross could not be more different than that won by the Tarheels. The Tarheels won and Jesus' lost. And the Tarheels were out to redeem themselves, while Jesus was out to redeem the world.

You see, there are some mistakes, some losses you can redeem and some you cannot. You can redeem a failure in school by doubling up on your studies and acing the class the next time around. Or you can redeem professional failure by retooling for work more suited to your skill set where you can excel.

But the hardest losses are the ones for which there is no redemption, at least no redemption you can give yourself: like hurting or betraying someone you love with such vile and ugly force that they never want anything to do with you again; or forsaking a dream only to discover that life is going to run out before you get a second chance. For those kind of failures, there is no do-it-yourself redemption. No, for that kind of gut-wrenching, heart-breaking, life-altering loss, only one kind of redemption will do: the kind Jesus won at his cross.

Jesus' style of redemption--setting the sinner free--is given dramatic expression in the story of Jesus and Barabbas. As Jesus' show trial grinds to a close, it is clear Pilate, the Roman governor,

knows Jesus is innocent, at least innocent of any crime deserving a sentence of death. But Pilate, the consummate politician, cannot summon the courage to do the right thing.

Barabbas is identified in the gospels as a bandit, a rebel, and a murderer. Most likely, he was a guerilla fighter against Rome, a terrorist against the reigning super power. He is on death row, awaiting his execution. So Pilate offers the crowd a choice: he will either release Barabbas, a true criminal, or Jesus, an unconventional teacher guilty of nothing more than upsetting the status quo. With bloodlust rising in their hearts and throats and voices, the crowd demands Barabbas. And none of Pilate's pitiful pleas can stop them, so in the end, Jesus is crucified, and Barabbas goes free.

Clearly, Matthew wants us to understand: in a tragic, but undeniable way, Jesus' death sets the guilty free. His death redeems Barabbas. And his death redeems you.

And for the most part, that is how Matthew's gospel, the other gospels, and the New Testament bear witness to the epoch-making, cosmos-shaping power of the cross. The redemptive power of Jesus' cross is proclaimed but not explained. Drawing on a host of metaphors like redemption and reconciliation and sacrifice, the biblical writers take refuge in the confidence that Jesus' cross brings forgiveness in a way and at a depth we could never give ourselves.

Anna Pavlova, the Russian ballerina of an earlier age, danced with such energy and elegance, she is still considered one of the greatest ballerinas of all time. Once, following a performance in America, reporters gathered for an interview. One plump, self-satisfied gentleman, chomping on a cigar, blurted out, "Miss Pavlova, I attended the ballet tonight, and I watched your performance. Now could you please explain the meaning of your dance?"

Miss Pavlova looked at the man with a hint of both amusement and contempt. "Sir," she answered, "If I could have explained it, I would not have danced."

Jesus didn't go to the cross to explain something; Jesus went to the cross to show us something: that no matter how great the damage we do to ourselves and one another, the life and love of God are greater still. And there is no failure, betrayal, or loss that is beyond redemption if God

declares it forgiven and gives us the hope and strength to start anew. As the Apostle sings in Romans, lifting a line from Isaiah's Suffering Servant, "If God be for us, who can be against us?!" (Romans 8:31; Isaiah 50:9a).

No, Jesus didn't go to the cross to explain something. Jesus went to the cross to break our hearts so at long last, God's healing mercies could seep down to our deepest ache and need and make us whole.

So when Jesus "gave his life as a ransom for many"--buying our freedom, as it were, at the cost of his own life--whom did he pay off? An outraged God? A wily devil? A fallen world? The answer is "None of the above." The cross is simply what it cost to drive home the undefeatable depths of God's great love for you. Like Isaiah's Suffering Servant, Jesus, God's obedient servant, takes the world's sin and suffering into himself. Instead of striking back at his tormentors, he turns inward and trusts in God. And when his bewildered cry rattles the heavens, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" it is not because God has forsaken him. Rather, Jesus has entered so personally into all the wrongs we cannot fix and all the wounds we cannot heal that he feels abandoned by God, just like we do at times, or like the Psalmist who first penned that anguished prayer (Psalm 22:1).

But God does not abandon Jesus any more than God abandons you. Rather, as Paul asserts in 2 Corinthians, "God was *in* Christ, reconciling the world to God's own self" (2 Cor. 5:19, KJV). God hurts for and with Jesus until in the shuddering depths of God's own broken heart, the sins of the world are forgiven.

Jesus' breathes his last and the earth swallows him whole. But three day later, God calls a radiant, reborn Jesus from the tomb to show that sin and death are defeated and to announce the Good News that you can be redeemed, set free, by the unsettling, scandalous depths of God's great love . . . for you.

A little boy, visiting his grandparents' farm, went down to the woods to practice his slingshot. The results were discouraging: he couldn't hit anything. So he headed back to the house, shoulders slumped, spirits sagging.

As he passed the pond, he saw his grandmother's pet duck. On a lark, he fired a rock, never expecting to hit his target. But as fate would have it, the rock hit the duck in the head and killed it.

The boy was shocked and sick with fear. In a panic, he hid the duck in the woodpile.

Then he saw his sister, watching from a window. She shook her head in silent condemnation, but said nothing.

After lunch, Grandma said, "Sally, please help me with the dishes."

"But Grandma," Sally said. "Johnny told me he wanted to help wash the dishes, didn't you, Johnny?" She gave him a knowing look that said, "I know about the duck," so Johnny did the dishes.

Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing, but Grandma said, "Don't take them both. I need help with supper."

Sally piped up, "Johnny can help. He said he wanted to."

Again, the knowing glance, so Johnny shrugged and helped cook supper.

And so it went for the next several days, with Johnny doing both his chores and his sister's. Finally, he couldn't stand it anymore. He went to his Grandma and confessed everything.

She knelt down and gave him a big hug. "Sweetheart, I already know," she said. "I was at the kitchen window and saw everything. But right then and there, my love for you came pouring out and I forgave you."

Johnny looked at her in astonishment: "Then why didn't you tell me?!"

"Because," grandma answered, her face etched with kindness. "I was waiting to see how long you would let Sally make you her slave."

What if, long ago in another place and time, all your sins were forgiven? What if on a God-forsaken hill outside Jerusalem, God saw you at your very worst, took the pain of that betrayal into

God's own heart of hearts, and declared it forgiven? What if at the cross of Christ, God stared down an unspeakable evil with an unspeakable love so that Jesus' body, dangling from a cross, becomes the sign forever after that God's love stops at nothing, not even this.

If that be true, the only question remaining is Grandma's question to Johnny: "How long will you remain sin's slave and refuse the liberation Jesus Christ died to give?"

In the end, the power of the cross rests not in our ability to explain it, but in our willingness to experience its release. We experience such liberation when we dare to believe the promise of the cross might actually be true, that nothing you have done or ever will do, can defeat God's ferocious, determined love for you.

For if you dare to believe that and live as though it were true, the confidence will grow within you that all the wrongs you cannot fix and all the wounds you cannot heal have been vanquished, once and for all, at the cross of Christ.

When that truth comes home to you in a personal way, you'll know what real redemption looks like. And it has nothing to do with winning a basketball game. And everything to do with God's reckless, relentless winning . . . of *you*.

We are astounded and grateful, O God, that you would stop at nothing--not even the cross of Jesus--to reach and redeem us. Now help us dare to believe and live this, the only truth, that can set us free. In the name of the crucified, yet living One, we pray. Amen.

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