

relative (Leviticus 25:51-52), and a price paid as for a first-born (Numbers 18:15). Great theological debates have taken place over which of these Old Testament examples most accurately reflects what Jesus did in order to serve humanity. However, it is best to accept that all of them say something important about the idea of 'ransom' (otherwise called 'redemption'). To say that Jesus has redeemed us by His life and death means that He has dealt with our sins, saved us in the eyes of God, and done so at the cost of His own life as God's First-born Son. We need every aspect of Christ's redeeming work!

Lastly, there is a long-standing theological argument over the meaning of the word 'for' in the sentence, 'to give His life as a ransom for many.' Some insist that this means 'a ransom on behalf of many', but others believe that the best translation is 'a ransom instead of many'; both are technically correct translations of the Greek, but which one is meant in this part of Mark's Gospel? You may feel that the difference is only slight, but it means a great deal. The second translation 'instead of' is championed by those who hold the traditional belief that Jesus died for us 'in our place' (see 1 Peter 2:24, Romans 5:8f., 1 Thessalonians 5:10, 2 Cor 5:14), but the first translation 'on behalf of' is championed by those who dislike the idea that Jesus died 'in our place' and took the punishment that we deserve for our sins. In short, this is a key text for debate in what is called the 'penal substitution theory' of the atonement.

Application

In the context of this passage, it seems to me that when Jesus said He would 'give His life as a ransom for many,' He meant that He would do for people what they could not do for themselves and go to the lengths of suffering and death which are not asked of us but of Him, in order to defeat the powers of evil and death which are a barrier between ourselves and God. Moreover, He did this as an act of pure service so that the sins of humanity might never again be a barrier to our reconciliation with God. He died both in our place, and on our behalf, and rose again so that we might be forgiven, and know salvation and the glory of His Kingdom. Given all the explanations of this in the various letters of the New Testament, I do not believe that splitting hairs over the meaning of one word in this sentence is enough to justify changing the historic stance of the Christian church that whether we like it or not, Jesus went to Jerusalem to perform an act of selfless service for our eternal benefit. He died both in our place and for our salvation.

Much of this passage is about the same theme which has occupied recent studies; that of Christian service. There is no doubt that even today, we have as much trouble trying to do away with worldly attitudes to authority and power as Jesus did in His. There is a hint in this passage, however, of a close connection between the work of Jesus Christ and the sacraments of baptism and communion; the 'baptism' and the 'cup' of 10:38. These features of the life of the church are called sacraments because they specifically demonstrate the saving work of Jesus Christ. At their best, they should be performed with the same attitudes of selfless service with which Jesus faced His death and resurrection. Some of the disputes which churches have over these are unworthy of God's people, and we need to recapture the spirit of Jesus if these great acts of the church are to become the means of grace which they are meant to be.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. If we follow the path of discipleship, what persecutions will we come across today?
2. Discuss in your group what you believe to be the main barriers to living a life of service.
3. How is the desire to be the 'greatest' demonstrated within the life of the church today? How can it be dealt with in a godly way?

Discipleship

It is impossible to be a follower of Jesus without help. Where do you get your help from? Some feel that they get sufficient help from the Bible, or from praying; but it is very important for us to receive help from others as well. To be a follower of the Lord, we need to be willing to receive help from others as well as give it in service. Take time to reflect on how you obtain help from others, and whether you need to open up more to the insights and help of other Christians.

Final Prayer

Bless us all, Lord Jesus, each one of us who calls on Your name for help and strength. You are the source of all our joy, You are the well-spring of our hope, and You are the foundation of all that is good in us. Lead us on to greater things and in due time, bring us to Your home in glory: AMEN

Prayer

Dear Jesus, give me a heart which is capable of discerning what is wise. Help me to identify what is right and wrong in each situation I face, so that I do not find myself wandering down evil pathways inadvertently. Make my spirit quick to accept what is good and reject what is wrong, so that I grow in grace and holiness. Thank You Jesus, my Lord and my Saviour: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Self and Sin

One aspect of sinfulness is the problem of human weakness, which leads even good people towards acts of evil by means of the lure of temptation. Consider the prayer 'lead us not into temptation' and pray that for yourself and your family, and also for your church. Pray also that when people fall, they will be prompted by the Spirit to repent, confess and find forgiveness.

Meditation

Have you seen the power of the Lord,
doing wonders in the world?
Have you listened to the Word of the Lord,
telling you about eternal truth?
Have you accepted the love of the Lord,
freeing you from all your sin?
Have you felt the touch of the Lord,
bringing peace into your soul?
Have you heard the voice of the Lord,
speaking wisdom to your mind?
Have you known the presence of the Lord,
giving comfort to your spirit?
Have you accepted the coming of the Lord,
which is promised in His Word?
For if you have, my friend, you have lived!

Bible Study - Mark 10:32-45

³² They were on the way, going up to Jerusalem with Jesus walking ahead of them, and they were amazed; they were also fearful as they followed. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was going to happen to Him, ³³ 'Look, we are going up to Jerusalem,' He said, 'and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and hand Him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴ And they will mock Him and spit on Him, and flog Him and kill Him. Then after three days He will rise.'

³⁵ Now, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached Jesus and said to Him, 'Teacher, we would like You to do for us whatever we ask of you.' ³⁶ He said to them, 'What do you want me to do for you?' ³⁷ They replied, 'Allow us to sit in your glory with one at your right hand and one at your left.' ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?' ³⁹ They said to Him, 'We can.' So Jesus said to them, 'You will drink the cup that I drink, and you will be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized, ⁴⁰ but it is not mine to say who will sit at my right hand or my left. This is for those for whom it has been made ready.'

⁴¹ When the ten heard it, they became angry with James and John. ⁴² Jesus called them together and said to them, 'You know that those who are thought of as rulers of the nations wield their power, but their superiors exercise power over them. ⁴³ But it will not be like this with you. Whoever wants to be great amongst you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first amongst you must be the slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Review

Our reading begins with the occasion when Jesus told His disciples for the third time that He would die and rise again (10:33,34), and if we have followed the broad sweep of Mark's Gospel since Peter declared 'You are the Messiah' (8:29), there will be no doubt in our minds that Jesus was single-mindedly pressing on with His divine call. The people who followed Jesus (10:32) were at one time amazed and afraid, because everything Jesus said and did was so utterly different from what they thought the Messiah should say and do. In addition, the Jesus they loved because of His incredible ministry of healing, deliverance and teaching, appeared to them to be committed to a path which He said Himself would lead to His death. We should not forget that before the resurrection happened, it was probably almost impossible for those who heard Jesus talk about His death and resurrection to pass mentally beyond the fact that He talked about His death. They had no comprehension of this or of everything that was happening before their very eyes.

Jesus was purposeful, and the tone of His voice in verse 33 was strong; 'look, we are going up to Jerusalem ...' He spoke as He had done before about what would happen to Him, but this time in more detail, including details which came from Old Testament prophecies (10:34 - see Isaiah 50:6 and Psalm 22:7). James and John had certainly understood that Jesus was the Messiah, but like everyone else, they had not fully grasped what this meant. They would have heard Jesus talk about humility and service (8:34-38) and becoming like children in order to enter the Kingdom (10:13-16), but they had no mental picture of how the Kingdom of God would function. Their question about whether they might sit with Jesus in glory may have been a result of pure incomprehension, or it may have been an attempt to try and find out whether their status as leading disciples would continue in the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, like so many who have asked questions before and since, their question and request (10:35,37) exposed their lack of understanding, but was also to our eternal benefit because the answer revealed yet more of what Jesus' coming death and resurrection would mean.

Jesus could have rebuked James and John for their question, but instead He challenged them, channelling their earnest zeal into a quest for understanding instead of the position and status they first sought. Jesus was set on a journey which would lead to a miracle of God's grace far greater than anything they had ever come across in their earthly experiences as disciples; this was the redemption of humanity through the death and resurrection of the Messiah. Jesus said to them, 'you do not know what you ask'; but then asked them whether they were prepared to share in 'the cup' and 'the baptism' of this glorious work (10:38)? Their answer was full of the bravado and energy of these two leading disciples, and they said 'Yes!' Jesus then confirmed that they would indeed share this work, but would never know what places they might have in glory (10:39,40).

This discussion is not too difficult for us to understand, because it is Jesus' wonderful confirmation that His disciples are indeed invited to share in the work of the redemption of humanity; John and James, Peter and the other disciples, and ourselves as well. Jesus alone would experience the cup of suffering and the baptism of death which would liberate humanity, 'For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (10:45); but all God's disciples would be commissioned to share this with the rest of the world (16:14f. Matt 28:18,19). Something that could not be done by people who were competing for positions of power, but true disciples of Jesus who held in highest regard the call to serve, and 'be the slave of all.' (10:44).

Going Deeper

Yet again, this passage pursues the relentless theme of this section of Mark's Gospel. For Jesus and His disciples, only humble servanthood would do; nothing else. The more we study this passage, the more we see how this theme is deeply ingrained in everything Jesus said and did on His way to Jerusalem.

The third prediction of Jesus' death

For the first time in Mark's Gospel, Jerusalem is mentioned as Jesus' final destination, and the place where He would die (10:32,33). The disciples and those who travelled with Jesus were used to thinking of Jerusalem as a place of celebration and joy, and all who journeyed there for its great festivals did so with unreserved joy! It is no wonder that they were full of fear and amazement at what was happening and what Jesus was teaching them on the way. His intent was relentless, as He walked 'ahead of them' (10:32), forging on ahead of everyone towards His destiny.

This, the third time Jesus had spoken to His disciples about what lay ahead in Jerusalem, was a far more detailed description of what would happen. The two earlier predictions (8:31 and

9:31) were both brief, but only here in this text do we find that Jesus talks of being handed over first to the Jewish authorities for condemnation and then to the civil (Roman) authorities for the conduct of His crucifixion. It was part of the control that Rome had over its colonies that only they could confirm and execute a death sentence; only they held absolute earthly power over life and death. Then, Jesus spoke of the terrible burden of His call, saying 'they will mock Him and spit on Him, and flog Him and kill Him.' Jesus knew the places in the Old Testament where the suffering of God's Messiah was prophesied, principally Isaiah 50:6, which reads: 'I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.' (The famous chapter 53 of Isaiah speaks more generally of the appalling suffering of the Messiah, but does not mention mocking, spitting and flogging specifically, as this earlier prophecy does). If we read on in Mark, we will find that Jesus first endured all three insults at the hands of the religious authorities (14:65) and then also as the Roman soldiers prepared for His crucifixion (15:19). Finally, He endured the mocking insult 'He saved others, He cannot save Himself' (15:26-32) before he finally died (15:37). Jesus knew what He was facing and did not turn back. He pursued God's will inexorably, to the astonishment of those around Him, and to our eternal gratitude.

The request of James and John

It is interesting that in yesterday's reading, Peter was justified by Jesus, who commended his recognition of the importance of giving up everything for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel (10:28-31). Now it was the turn of the other two of the three leading disciples to approach Jesus, and as we have already seen, their request to be seated each side of the Messiah in glory was bold. It was likely they had in mind either positions of authority at the expected final judgement, or seats of honour next to Jesus at the great 'Messianic banquet'. These were the two main things people associated with the coming glory of God.

These two possibilities may well explain why Jesus responded by talking about the 'cup that I drink' and 'the baptism with which I am baptised' (10:38). It is not obvious to us why Jesus should talk about these things, but in His mind there was a connection. The cup was obviously a feature of a banquet, but it was also a symbol of suffering and trial (Psalm 11:6, 75:8, Isaiah 51:17,22, Jeremiah 25:15,17); for Jesus, the glory of the Messiah was to be achieved through suffering. Was this something that James and John were prepared to accept? Secondly, baptism was used in Jesus' day as a sign of a 'change of ways'; John the Baptist had preached a message of judgement, and afterwards, baptised those who were prepared to change as a consequence of that judgement (John 1:4-8). Jesus was about to add new meaning to the sign of baptism through His death and resurrection, making it into a sign of God's 'righteous judgement' by which people would be found acceptable to Him through Jesus Christ. Was this death and resurrection something that James and John were prepared to accept?

We are not told what response James and John gave to what Jesus said; but we can imagine that they remained unclear about much of what Jesus said. They responded positively to Him because they wanted to please Him, follow Him and go where He wanted them to go; and if necessary, blindly. This is a great example for us to follow, and although the disciples were not given an answer about what would happen in glory (no-one will know about these things until they happen - 10:40), what Jesus said to them has become an important part of the church's understanding of the sacraments of communion and baptism ever since.

Rules of service for the Kingdom

Meanwhile, the other disciples could only see what was happening from a purely earthly perspective. They were cross that James and John had attempted to claim authority and status above them. This exposed the heart of the problem they had with status and authority. In general, if people feel that these things are important, they will always compare themselves against others and complain about their lot, and Jesus had fought against such flawed human behaviour throughout His ministry. He continued to drive home His message about the importance of service yet again, by appealing to the disciple to accept that positions of power and authority were only relative; even 'rulers of nations ... wield their power, but their superiors exercise power over them.' (10:42).

Jesus' final words in this passage are important; 'For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (10:45). What did Jesus mean by the word 'ransom'? The word used here comes from the Old Testament where it is used in four distinct ways; meaning a compensation paid for a crime (Numbers 35:31-32), a redemption of a life that would otherwise be forfeit before God (Exodus 21:30), a fee handed over to free a