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GOD'S BROKEN AND REDEEMED WORK-IN-PROGRESS

ROB BENTZ

The Unfinished Church: God's Broken and Redeemed Work-in-Progress

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God's Called-Out Community

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

1 Peter 2:9, NIV

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

Each spring, the National Football League holds its draft of the best college football talent in the nation. Quarterbacks everyone knows and offensive lineman that only close family members recognize hear their names called by the league's commissioner. Every major sports media outlet captures these larger-than-life moments of the select few who have been chosen.

It's a big deal!

Thousands of talented college football players are eligible to be selected in the draft every year, yet only about 250 hear their names called. So, whether you are the first player selected and will soon be signing your name to a multimillion-dollar contract, or you're Mr. Irrelevant (the last player chosen in the

draft) who'll have to kick and scratch and claw your way onto a team—you are significant. You've been called.

I've often wondered what it's like to be chosen in the NFL draft. What it's like to hear your name called as one of the most wanted, sought-after college football players in the country. What it's like to know that an entire city, state, and national fan base celebrates your arrival. What it's like to know that kids and adults alike will soon be wearing jerseys with your name sewn on the back. The magnitude of the experience and the fanfare that lies ahead must be exhilarating—and a bit overwhelming.

After a few moments of NFL dreaming, I realize that in a much more significant way—I am that guy! I have been chosen. I have been selected. I have been called to something new and exciting and much bigger than I can fully grasp.

You see, I have been drafted. I've been called out of darkness into God's wonderful light (1 Pet. 2:9–10). As a believer, I am now part of God's one-of-a-kind community of called-out men and women. I've been chosen, not by a professional football team, but rather by the God of creation. If you're a believer in Christ, you've been called too.

But this calling is different than any professional sports league draft. There are no team representatives for the Christian faith who'll quickly put a hat on your head fashioning an *ichthus* or a hip-looking Celtic cross. There are no reporters quick to ask how you feel about being called. And there's no large lump-sum signing bonus for the chosen. (Though, I've come to understand the eternal-benefits package is beyond imagination!)

Picture this; a holy, righteous God has called *you*. He has rescued *you* from darkness. God has given *you* his righteousness through the payment of his Son on the cross. He has freely given *you* his amazing grace. If these realities don't cause you

to fall to your knees in humility, praising God, you simply don't understand.¹

It's a really big deal!

Being called out by God, you have become part of a unique community of people called the church. This call is nothing short of amazing, but it does come with a few significant thoughts to consider, and a few challenges with which we must wrestle. First, we must consider the holier-than-thou issue. Then, we need to take seriously and embrace the weight of responsibility. And, last, we must acknowledge that we are a peculiar people.

Let's examine all three.

THE HOLIER-THAN-THOU ISSUE

So you're called out by God? You're one of his chosen people? You're part of a select club of holiness? Nice thoughts. Try wearing that badge of honor around when you start talking about your faith in Jesus with your nonbelieving friends. Curiously, these conversations tend to end rather abruptly because nobody wants to hear about how much God loves *you*. What your friends need to hear, see, feel, and experience is how much God loves *them*!

This, too, is a really big deal! (It's actually a huge part of why God called you, but we'll get to that in a moment.)

Humble recognition and acknowledgment of our called-outness is imperative when we interact with our nonbelieving friends. It's not that you and I were smarter than our friends and therefore saw something they couldn't. No. We didn't do the choosing, God did. This ought to bring us to our knees in gratitude and humility before our holy God. From this position of humility, we must submit everything about ourselves to him. We submit who we feel we should have been, who we truly are, and who we can ultimately become, because God's

grace transcends our past failures and overcomes our current disappointments.

Once our heart's posture becomes one of humility, God can love us in ways that go far beyond our comprehension. He can—and will—pour out his amazing grace upon us. And this isn't just a midafternoon sprinkle—it's a downpour! God showers his people with grace. Once we've been drenched in this grace, once we've soaked in it awhile, then God begins to use us for his purposes.

The requirement is a heart of humility—a high view of God's amazing call on your life, and a low view of your role in that calling. He's made you a part of his one-of-a-kind community called the church for a purpose. This calling, this transition into God's community, serves as the foundation from which you worship God, genuinely love his people, and humbly serve others.

THE WEIGHT OF RESPONSIBILITY

As Peter the apostle wrote in his first epistle (1 Pet. 2:9–10), we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation called out to do something significant—to declare the praises of him who did the choosing. We have been chosen to declare the praises of the one who shined light into the darkest areas of our blackened souls and made us new.

How do we declare this? The answer is found in the powerful imagery of the text. The priesthood and our inclusion in God's holy nation are overflowing with Old Testament meaning and significance (Ex. 19:5–6).

Let's begin with the priesthood. Old Testament priests were a called group of men who had a unique, intimate relationship with God. A priest served as the mediator between God and man. Similarly, God's called-out ones—the royal priesthood—now have a special relationship with God and serve as mediators between the Father and nonbelievers.

Consider the weighty words of humanitarian Jean Vanier, who founded L'Arche community of faith for people with developmental disabilities. He writes, "The Church, like Jesus, is called to announce good news to the poor, liberation to prisoners and the oppressed, and sight to the blind. It is called to bring life and to help people grow to greater freedom and wholeness so that all may be one."²

Our calling, our being set apart, comes with a huge responsibility—and the tremendous privilege—of being God's priests to an unbelieving and dying world. As the Old Testament priest would offer sacrifices to God, so now the priesthood of believers offers the sacrifice of our very lives. We humbly offer our head, our heart, and our hands as a living sacrifice. We offer our head (our mind, really) as a sacrifice when we study God's Word, theology, and/or apologetic writings to be better equipped to answer the honest questions of our unbelieving friends. We offer our heart when we genuinely enter into the pain of a friend's marital struggle, parenting challenge, or financial difficulty. We offer our hands to whatever social issue is tearing at the fabric of our community—homelessness, underperforming schools, failed marriages, teen pregnancy, to name a few. We are called to enter into the greatest areas of need in our community.

Christ followers are not promised financial wealth, physical health, a comfortable life, or any other self-serving reality.

Who needs you to be their priest?

WE ARE A PECULIAR PEOPLE

When Jesus calls you and me, we are invited to a life of sacrifice and service. It's a life of carrying our cross (Luke 14:27) every day with no illusion of earthly success—however "success" is defined in our culture this week (a huge bank account,

a prestigious job, thousands of Facebook friends, etc.). Christ followers are not promised financial wealth, physical health, a comfortable life, or any other self-serving reality.

Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man we worship and serve, died in the most despised, humiliating, painful way known at the time—crucifixion! Why would we, Christ’s followers, even for a moment believe that our day-to-day existence should be a life of luxury and pleasure? It’s not.

This is why the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a man who stood up for authentic biblical faith in the face of Nazi Germany and was ultimately martyred because of his stance—are quoted so often: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”³ Christ followers who have an honest grasp of the day-to-day struggle to have one foot firmly in the twenty-first century *and* their eyes on eternity are those who genuinely live out Bonhoeffer’s words.

Let’s be honest; this is countercultural thinking. If you strive to live out your faith in this way, you’re just plain weird when measured by the consumeristic, narcissistic way of the modern world. And yet, that’s exactly why it makes sense for God’s called-out community! He’s called you and me into relationship for *his* glory—not ours. God has drawn you and me into a relationship with himself for *his* purposes—not ours. God invites you and me to a life of serving him, submitting to his agenda, and furthering his kingdom. It has little to do with us and our earthly desires. This isn’t fatalistic thinking, either. Rather, it’s an appropriate view of a holy God, and a healthy perspective of sinful men and women who are being brought to their knees by the amazing grace that God is showering upon them.

For the nonbeliever, this thinking—much less the entire way of life—makes little sense. Living sacrificially for the betterment of others is rare enough. Then consider that believers do so to follow the teachings of a man who died a brutal

and barbaric death more than two thousand years ago. This is just too bizarre and counterintuitive for some of our friends to grasp—much less allow it to change the entire shape of their lives.

And if the personal sacrifice is not enough, let's not forget the most basic of all wants in our culture today—comfort and convenience. Participation with others in God's church really messes up a Sunday morning. Honestly, wouldn't it be easier to sleep in on Sunday, brew a strong pot of coffee, fry up some eggs and bacon, lounge around in your jammies, and get ready for NFL football? Of course it would. But we can't do that! God's called-out ones are compelled to something different. We're moved beyond our own comfort and convenience. We're drawn to something bigger. That's why it's entirely fair for nonbelievers to view us as peculiar people. We get up early, shave, shower, and do all the normal get-ready-for-work activities on our day off. Why? So we can meet with a group of other Christ followers to sing praises, engage with Bible-based teaching, and worship Jesus.

We *are* different.

God has called us, redeemed us (more on this in chapter 2), changed our hearts, and made us this way. He's pulled us out of a life of darkness and loneliness. He's given us a different view of the world around us. He's given us passion to praise him. He's given his chosen ones a different present reality—and a glorious future.

You're peculiar. I'm peculiar. Let's just go with it!

OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES OF THE CALLED-OUT COMMUNITY

Remember the NFL draft image at the beginning of this chapter? Here's where it breaks down just a bit: The players selected in the NFL draft have shown their value and worth before tens

The Foundation

of thousands of screaming college football fans each autumn Saturday for the past four years. The highlight reel from their on-field exploits at a major university, combined with their raw athletic ability and their future potential, make them worthy of selection.

The people of God? Israel? Not so much. In fact, not at all. Consider Moses's words from Deuteronomy when he explains Israel's special place in God's heart:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations. (Deut. 7:6–9)

On the plains of Moab, the people of God have been waiting and waiting and waiting to finally get to the Promised Land. They have been in exile for longer than you and I invest in raising our family or building our career. That's when Moses points the second generation of the exile to the facts—God has chosen the nation of Israel. He's chosen them not because they were special, significant, holy, righteous, wealthy, good-looking, or anything else. God chose them because he loved them. He chose them to show them he was faithful to the covenant that he had made with their forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God chose this group of people from slavery and tyranny

under Pharaoh because he wanted to reveal his character. He chose them to show his faithfulness. God chose them to reveal his amazing love. And he chose them for something even larger than they could imagine or comprehend!

One Old Testament scholar writes, "Israel was intended to model the character of God and thus be a witness to surrounding nations. . . . As 'priests' in a broad sense, they were to be mediators of the presence of God to the other nations."⁴

In the book of Exodus, Moses serves as the mouthpiece for God to his people. God's message to this group of people with nothing special on their collective résumé is clear and consistent: "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6).

God chose a people with whom he desired a covenant relationship, a nation to whom he would freely give his special love and favor. What he asked for in return was faithfulness, devotion, and perhaps most significant of all—a willingness to be a blessing to others. God's people will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Bruce Waltke writes:

God's election is not a blessing that can be enjoyed in seclusion by communities hiding out in the desert. It is not some private, individual assurance of material prosperity and physical health. It is, rather, a special status given to a people who by their divine calling must live before the eyes of the world, engage with the nations.⁵

God set his affection on Israel for a distinct purpose—that they would be a blessing to all nations. Throughout history, God's people have attempted (with varying degrees of success) to fulfill the high call of this awesome responsibility.

NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES OF THE CALLED-OUT COMMUNITY

When you consider the language of being called out and chosen by God in the New Testament, the apostle Paul serves as the loudest and clearest voice. His letters offer strong images of God's grace showered upon a called-out community. Truth is, it's harder to find a letter where Paul *doesn't* use called-out language when speaking of God's people than to find one where he does. The apostle's writings to the different stops on his missionary journeys are filled with chosen, called-out language. Here's a sample:

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints . . . (Rom. 1:7)

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints . . . (1 Cor. 1:2)

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will. (Eph. 1:4–5)

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. (1 Thess. 1:4–5)

We always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power. (2 Thess. 1:11)

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect . . . (Titus 1:1)

Paul begins the majority of his letters with a reminder, an acknowledgment of the believer's standing as one called, cho-

sen, or elect of God. These reminders are there for a distinct purpose: to help believers connect with our true identity as called-out men and women. Paul wants us as God's people always to be mindful of who we really are. He reminds us that our rightful position before a holy God is humility—with privileges.

I often take the same approach with my young children. When I have words of encouragement or guidance, I begin with an acknowledgment of who they are as my son and my daughter—just to remind them that they hold a unique and special place in my heart. They have rights and privileges that no other children have. They are special—and specially loved. From this position of security, we can begin to talk and work through important instructions or actions.

Ultimately, being a called man or woman is a position of greatness. But it's obviously not of our own doing. Once Paul has established this fact with his reading audience—and only then—he presses on with the instruction and exhortation and doctrine that typically follow. It's our status, a "know who you are" idea, that drives Paul's subsequent call of God's people to God-honoring action.

Paul's letters are typically addressed to Jews who have a heritage of faith. Peter writes to a bunch of Gentiles!

The apostle Peter also uses similar chosen terminology in his first letter: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood" (1 Pet. 1:1–2).

Thematically, Peter's writing sounds very similar to that of the apostle Paul. However, these words are very different

because they are written to a very different audience. Paul's letters are typically addressed to Jews who have a heritage of faith. Peter writes to a bunch of Gentiles! Peter is writing to "outsiders," yet he's using terms like "elect . . . of God the Father."

How can this be?

Edmund Clowney explains the significance of this often overlooked insight:

Nothing is more astonishing than that he should call these Gentiles the *chosen of God the Father*. Israel was God's chosen people. . . . How could Gentiles be called God's chosen, his elect? . . .

. . . These Christian Gentiles are God's chosen people because he has known them from all eternity. Jesus Christ was foreknown by the Father before the world was created. The chosen people of Christ are also foreknown by the Father. Their inclusion in the people of God is no accident, no afterthought, but God's purpose from the beginning.⁶

This opens up a keen point of interest and a door for major theological discussion. The Israelites, God's chosen people throughout the Old Testament, are not alone in God's ultimate plan of salvation and redemption. Peter introduces us to the reality that God's plan now includes outsiders—Gentiles. (This is a *really* good thing for those of us without Jewish heritage!)

Clowney continues, "God's choosing is the final reason that polluted Gentiles can be called his people. But God's choosing also means that he will act to make these Gentiles his own. To belong to God they must be redeemed from their sin and washed from its stain."⁷

Peter acknowledges the requirement of Christ's blood and the Spirit's work through the knowledge of God to bring about this dramatic change. Ultimately, Peter, the rock on whom Jesus would build his church, helps bring great clarity to the

work of the Trinity in our salvation—our election as sons and daughters of God. Peter helps us grasp our place in God's called-out community, the church.

SO WHAT?

How does all of this talk of being called out, chosen, elect among the nations strike you? Are you humbled? Shocked? Confused? Do you now have more questions than answers?

I hope you sense a bit of all of these things. I know I do.

The fact that God would call out a special group of people to love, draw to himself, call his own, shower with unspeakable grace, and then entrust with special roles and responsibilities in his kingdom work is quite astonishing when you get to the heart of it.

But that's precisely where things often fall apart. This truth doesn't always get from the pages of Scripture up to our head and ultimately penetrate our heart.

Intellectually, we acknowledge the biblical facts. We nod in appreciation of these truths from the pages of Scripture. We might even worship with other believers in community, talk about our faith regularly, and enjoy some theologically driven intellectual stimulation. But that's where it often stops. We love the fact that God has chosen us and called us to himself. We gladly receive his gift of faith. We soak in the shower of his grace. With ease, we receive the benefits of his love and grace and forgiveness.

Sometimes, though, we take things a step further. We actually abuse the gifts God has given us by taking them for granted. But we're not alone. It's been happening for centuries. God's people have repeatedly underappreciated, overlooked, forgotten, and intentionally ignored God's special favor.

A cavalier, brazen attitude toward God and his kindness is nothing new. My son, Reid, often rolls his eyes in youthful

sarcasm when we're in the middle of reading an Old Testament story from his children's Bible. He'll say, "Let me guess, Dad; God's people don't trust him. They turn to idols." The further we read on in the biblical story, my son is usually right.⁸

I often feel a bit strange and uncomfortable when we read of the unfaithfulness of God's people in the Old Testament,

Being chosen by
God is based upon
nothing we've done.
So, this reality should
bring us to our knees
in worship. Does it?

because I know that I'm often guilty of the same wandering heart. When it's my turn to respond to God in faithfulness, faithfulness is the very thing I lack. I tend to act like my Old Testament brethren more than I care to admit. Unfortunately, many twenty-first-century believers do the same.

This fact is a bit odd, frankly, considering that we really have only one response to give—worship.

As we've seen earlier in this chapter, being chosen by God is based upon nothing we've done. So, this reality should bring us to our knees in worship. Does it? If so, how often? I'm not talking about a guilt-ridden response. A duty-driven, dress-up, put-on-a-happy-face, go-through-the motions, politely-whisper-a-few-songs-and-prayers worship response.

That's no good.

I'm referring to a genuine heart posture of worship of the God who chose you and made you part of a special community. For some of us, this response may look like a raise-your-hands-in-the-air, dance-around-the-room kind of celebration. For others of us, it may be a matter of falling face-first on the floor, prostrate before the Lord, unable to speak. Worship with celebration. Worship with contemplation. Worship through singing, dancing, or speech. Whatever form it takes, you and I must worship!

John Stott, one of the most faithful churchmen of the last

century, acknowledged the importance of worship *and* another response: "The church is a people that have been both called out of the world to worship God and sent back into the world to witness and serve."⁹

These are our responsibilities as part of God's called-out community—the church. We've been called to live a life of worship and service (Luke 4:8). We've been called to offer ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1). We've been called to serve as priests (1 Pet. 2:9).

As the church, you and I have been invited on an intimate journey with God. We are now challenged to invite others to join us on that journey.

I love the succinct way Christopher J. H. Wright describes the role of the church: "It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God's mission."¹⁰

How are you living out God's mission?

What area of your life are you sacrificing for God's work?

Are you expressing your priesthood?

What is your active response to God and his people?
(Again, a guilt-driven response doesn't work.)

Our former pastor, Matt Heard, taught our congregation that worship is "our active, all-of-life response to the worth of who God is and what he does." I love this definition, because it captures the only worthy response that called-out men and women have to our almighty God—worship. Worship through singing. Worship through painting. Worship through writing. Worship through serving at the soup kitchen. Worship through your accounting practice. Worship through parenting. Worship.

As part of God's called-out, chosen, elect-among-all-nations community called the church, what is your priestly act of worship?

The Foundation

Church History

The truths discussed in this chapter have deep roots in the history of God's church. Consider the following example as you engage with these truths.

THE FRENCH CONFESSION OF FAITH, AD 1559

XII. We believe that from this corruption and general condemnation in which all men are plunged, God, according to his eternal and immutable counsel, calleth those whom he hath chosen by his goodness and mercy alone in our Lord Jesus Christ, without consideration of their works, to display in them the riches of his mercy.¹¹

Music

The themes discussed in this chapter have been expressed in both traditional and contemporary music. Below are a few titles to encourage you as you reflect on these themes.

“Church of God, Beloved and Chosen,” traditional hymn,
by Frances Ridley Havergal
“We Are the People of God,” by Mark Tedder
“What You’ve Called Me To,” by Eoghan Heaslip

Questions for Discussion

These questions have been developed for you to consider personally, answer honestly, and discuss openly—engaging your head and your heart—as you process the truths of this chapter together in community.

1. Have you ever been chosen for something you didn’t expect? A promotion? An award? Try to recall your deepest emotion in that moment. Were you humbled? Were you proud? Try to explain what you were feeling and thinking.

2. In spite of what many of us have been told, Christians are not promised financial wealth, physical health, or any other self-serving reality. Link this idea with the words Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a generation ago, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." What about you has died the longer you've been a follower of Christ? Explain with details.

3. When you consider the biblical truth of your status as a member of God's "royal priesthood," what comes to mind? What does this stir in your head and heart? Discuss.

4. What is your primary, active, all-of-life response of worship? How does this serve as your priestly responsibility? Explain.

God's Redeemed Community

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

Mark 10:45

You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20

Our practical life is to be moulded by our belief in the Redemption, and our declared message will be in accordance with our belief.

Oswald Chambers, *Thy Great Redemption*

Silverware. A burlap bag full of the genuine stuff. That's what separates freedom and a return to prison labor for ex-convict Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's classic *Les Misérables*.

The film adaptation from 1998 captures the power-packed scene. After more than nineteen years of hard labor, Jean is out on parole. He's got many miles to travel to meet his parole officer. On the journey, Jean knocks on the door of the local

church—the home of the bishop. The bishop welcomes Jean in for a hot meal and a warm bed. Conversation at the dinner table is awkward at best. Jean, not well versed in table manners, gobbles up the soup as though he hasn't eaten in years.

Then, after everyone has turned in for the night, the bishop hears a rumbling in the dining area. He wanders down in his robe to find the silverware in a state of disarray. In the shadows of darkness, he turns to find Jean hiding behind a large cabinet. The two men's eyes meet. Then Jean floors the bishop with a powerful punch to the face. Quickly, he stuffs the silverware into his knapsack and runs off into the night.

In the morning, the local authorities bring a handcuffed Jean Valjean back to the church. They've caught the ex-convict with his knapsack full of expensive silverware.

That's when something amazing happens.

The bishop tells the authorities that he *gave* Jean Valjean the silverware. He then chastises a speechless Jean for failing to take also the silver candlesticks. "They're worth at least 2000 francs!"

The authorities are astonished!

Then, with conviction, the bishop pulls down the hood that hides much of Jean's face and speaks words of life: "And don't forget, don't ever forget, you've promised to become a new man. Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil. With this silver, I've ransomed you from fear and hatred. And now I give you back to God."

The bishop pays the price of his own silver to purchase freedom for Jean Valjean.

This is an act of redemption.

Redemption; it stirs our soul. It's the theme that makes us stand up and cheer at the movie theater. It brings hope where all hope seems lost. It's the story that causes us to watch a film a dozen times just so we can relive the powerful ending.

It grips our heart and won't let go. Redemption flips on the floodlights in places where darkness reigns.

For the Christ follower, redemption is not just *a* story—it's *our* story!

It's your story. It's my story.

Redemption is the reality of the price Jesus paid on the cross for you. His perfect life given as payment for your sin-stained existence. It's the only way that you and I could be released from the penalty that our sin deserves before a holy God.¹

Jerry Bridges says, "Just as the diamonds on a jeweler's counter shine more brilliantly when set upon a dark velvet pad, so Christ's redemptive work shines more brilliantly when contrasted with our sin and the consequent curse that was upon us."²

- Redemption is what the believer has through the work of Jesus on the cross.
- Redemption, received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, is your personal release from the bondage of sin.
- Redemption is your freedom.
- Redemption is your new beginning.

Getting an honest grasp of the redemption that Jesus has accomplished for his people is critical for a biblical understanding of the church.

Without a clear recognition of God's payment on behalf of his people, you and I will not see each other accurately. I won't see you as God sees you—redeemed by the blood of his Son, Jesus. And you won't see me as God sees me. Instead, I'll see your scars of sin. You'll look at me and see someone tattooed from head to toe with the ink of sin, guilt, and shame.

We can't help ourselves. We don't choose to view each other this way. It's just incredibly difficult for one sinner to look past the sin of another to get a true glimpse of what God sees when

he looks at his people. Instead, we see each other like the Unfinished Church³ on the island of Bermuda—with flaws exposed.

This is why it's so critical for us to understand God's redemption of his people. If we don't, we will never see each other as God sees us—as redeemed men and women of a redeemed community called the church.

Do you see your brother or sister in the faith this way? You should. Jesus paid for them and for you. This changes everything! Your sin, and the subsequent scars that cover your body, have been, and are being, redeemed. This is how God views his people. This is why God's grace truly is amazing.

Because of the grace that is ours through faith in Jesus's sacrifice on the cross, the Father views you and me without all those bumps, bruises, and scars that sin leaves on each of us. Instead, the Father views us through blood-colored glasses of forgiveness.

The Father views us through blood-colored glasses of forgiveness.

OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES OF REDEMPTION

Stories and images of God's redemptive acts weave their way throughout the Old Testament narrative. But it's not just imagery. Vocabulary specific to redemption is used about 130 times in the Old Testament.⁴

God's redemptive acts for his chosen people include the following: God's chosen people, the Israelites, have food when others do not (Genesis 46–47). They're spared God's wrath in judgment (Exodus 8–12). They're delivered from tyranny through miracles (Exodus 13–14). They have victory on the battlefield when the number of soldiers is shockingly *not* in their favor (Deuteronomy 7; 1 Samuel 17; 2 Samuel 5, 8). The ways God gives favor and performs redemptive acts for his people are nothing short of amazing!

Most Bible scholars agree the most significant act of redemption found in the Old Testament is the work of God in setting the captives free from the armies of Pharaoh in the account of the exodus.

Early in the story, long before God brings plagues down upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians, he reveals to Moses his redemptive plan. “I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. . . . I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD” (Ex. 6:6, 8).

But the Israelites, struggling to survive under the harsh punishment of the Egyptians, ignore the promise. They fail to grasp the promise of future redemption and deliverance. They totally miss it! The difficulty of their circumstances is just too large in their minds for them to have faith. “Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery” (Ex. 6:9).

Isn't it curious how time moves on, generations pass, and we have the historical facts of God's faithfulness throughout the Old and New Testaments, and thousands of years of church history—yet God's people still overlook the current reality of our redemption. The thickheadedness of God's people is astounding!

Redemption seems far off, unrealistic, otherworldly. Like the Israelites under Pharaoh, we're often shortsighted. Like the Israelites, we often get stuck in the depths of our own messy circumstances and miss the future promise of God to his chosen people.

Only after experiencing the unfathomable—the parting of the Red Sea—did God's people awaken to the reality of God's faithful deliverance. Only after walking through a water tun-

nel of redemption did God's people respond in praise and trust for what God would do in their future.

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

"I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed
gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.
The LORD is a man of war;
the LORD is his name.

"You have led in your steadfast love the people whom
you have redeemed;
you have guided them by your strength to your
holy abode." (Ex. 15:1–3, 13)

Yet even after witnessing a miracle so powerful and dramatic that it would make twenty-first-century filmmakers jealous, God's people continued their wandering ways. Their lives were marked by a cycle of sin, brokenness, and halfhearted repentance.

This embarrassing history causes us to ask, Why does God give special favor, complete with numerous redemptive acts, to a specific group of people? In God's sovereign plan, he will use his people to bless all peoples. Redemption comes with a responsibility to be a blessing to others. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2–3).

Right there, in the text, all peoples on earth will be blessed

through God's chosen, redeemed people. This truth isn't just for Old Testament scholars to discuss in the halls of academia. It's a truth that applies to God's people today. It's a biblical reality that should shape our theology and our practice.

This is why God's church, not some man-made governmental structure, must be the cultural leader in caring for the most basic human needs. This caring must begin within our own congregation, and it should reach into our community, be felt in our city, and ultimately touch those on the other side of the world.

At the church where I serve, we encourage God's people to bring a canned food item to church each weekend. This collection serves those in need within our body, and it helps supply

All peoples on earth will be blessed through God's chosen, redeemed people.

the food banks in our city. But our call doesn't stop at our city limits. Like an increasing number of churches, we're also deeply involved in global initiatives to eradicate hunger and extreme poverty. This is not a model that we created. We didn't just have a committee meeting and decide that we'd toss a

few dollars and man-hours at the problem. From the time of Moses, God has called his people to be a blessing to others. He's called us to pay the ransom for the freedom of others. He's called us to be agents of redemption.

NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES OF REDEMPTION

In the New Testament, the snapshots we see of redemption are Christ-centered. The imagery is far more concise. Redemption is not about a rescue from a tyrannical earthly king, but about something much bigger, something eternal—the redemption of souls unto eternal life!

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus clarifies his mission to his disciples.

At the end of what had to be a disappointing interaction with James and John (amid their bickering and posturing about their ultimate and rightful place next to the Savior), Jesus says, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Jesus’s mission was intentional. He didn’t come to start a religion, give people a name to spit out when they’re angry, or become a cultural icon. Jesus came to pay a ransom that sin’s cost required. Jesus entered humanity to pay the ultimate price, his own life, to redeem a people for himself.

The apostle Paul wrote frequently and with great clarity about Christ’s redemptive work for sinful men and women. His letters to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, and the Colossians all show impassioned conviction that the facts of redemption must be grasped by Christ’s followers. Then this grasp must lead to tangible action.

TO THE ROMANS

In Romans 3, Paul refutes a living-by-the-law gospel—which really isn’t very good news anyway. Instead, he explains the gospel of righteousness through faith in Jesus, who made redemption available at the cross for all who would believe.

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of

God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 3:19–24)

The impact of these words has reverberated throughout church history. They inspired the Protestant Reformation as a priest named Martin Luther grabbed ahold of the apostle Paul's words "by faith" and wouldn't let go. Luther fought long, experienced much pain and anguish, and was hunted like a wild animal for his life-giving emphasis on "by faith" alone. Luther stood firm. And this fresh view of the apostle Paul's words literally changed the world forever!

John Stott notes, "The antithesis between grace and law, mercy and merit, faith and works, God's salvation and self-salvation, is absolute. No compromising mishmash is possible."⁵

This emphasis on righteousness through faith alone gives people access to Christ's righteousness. It's not an unattainable reality. Rather, "by faith" it is accessible.

Redemption also ripples through Paul's writing in Romans 6. The apostle rails against the sinful nature. He speaks of its condemnation; its utter lack of freedom, its bondage, its penalty of death. Then Paul explains the life-changing reality of Christ's work on the cross in relation to our sinful nature.

You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

. . . But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:18, 22–23, NIV)

F. F. Bruce summarizes Paul's emphasis in Romans this way:

Thanks to his [Jesus's] redemptive work, men may find themselves "in the clear" before God; Christ is set before

them in the gospel as the one who by his self-sacrifice and death has made full reparation for their sins. The benefits of the atonement thus procured may be appropriated by faith—and only by faith.⁶

TO THE CORINTHIANS

Nothing in any of Paul's writings gives a more concise summary of his view of redemption than the words in his first letter to the church in Corinth: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

This is Paul's theology of redemption in bumper-sticker form. He gives us the facts followed by an exhortation. Paul wants readers to grasp the reality of their redemption. That's the indicative. Then he throws down the "so what" in the form of a challenge. That's the imperative.

Here's the breakdown:

- *Indicative*: Christ followers are redeemed. You are no longer a free agent. You were bought with the payment of Jesus's life.
- *Imperative*: Honor God in how you use your body.

Because redemption is your reality, Paul says: Do something about it! Honor God with your body. This is Paul's challenge to grab hold of the facts, let them penetrate your head (mind), soften your heart, and then put your hands in motion. Where there is a need in your church—serve. Where you find a need in your community—do something about it. Where there is a need on the other side of the world—go!

David Platt captures this idea in his book *Radical Together*. He writes, "We live sacrificially, not because we feel guilty, but because we have been loved greatly and now find satisfaction in sacrificial love for others."⁷

Once truth is established and understood, it must lead to action.

TO THE GALATIANS

One text that stands above all of Paul's other writings on the issue of redemption comes from his letter to the churches in Galatia. That's where he outlines the significance of God's redemptive work for his people throughout human history. In the third chapter, the apostle makes a strong point to link the faith of Abraham with the faith of those who now trust in Jesus. It's a powerful tie that binds God's redemptive act across time and Testaments.

. . . just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

. . . Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Gal. 3:6–14)

The apostle states unashamedly that Abraham had saving faith. How can that be when Jesus hadn't even come to earth yet? Abraham had faith in the Messiah who *would come*—Jesus. It was a genuine faith. It was powerful faith. And it was a faith that set an example and a trajectory for all who would follow in Abraham's line—all who would be part of God's one-of-a-kind redeemed community.

Later in the same chapter, Paul emphasizes the historical significance of Abraham's line of faith.

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal. 3:26–29)

Stott adds:

We have seen that in Christ we belong to God and to each other. In Christ we also belong to Abraham. We take our place in the noble historical succession of faith, whose outstanding representatives are listed in Hebrews 11. . . . we find our place in the unfolding purpose of God. We are the spiritual seed of our father Abraham, who lived and died 4,000 years ago, for in Christ we have become heirs of the promise which God made to him.⁸

As believers, men and women of faith, we have a lineage among the seed of Abraham—the children of God—that is breathtaking!

TO THE COLOSSIANS

Writing to the believers in Colosse, Paul deals with redemption in their present situation. He wants them to recognize that redemption is something they already have in their possession. Redemption has already been bestowed upon them by God. "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13–14).

This is true of Christ followers today, too. Redemption is

ours, right now. Do we have it fully? Of course not—we're unfinished. But what we now have only in part will one day be fully realized in glory!

A STORY OF REDEMPTION

Just about everywhere a good story is told you'll find elements of redemption at its core. Likely, redemption is an undergirding theme in your favorite movie. It's probably the unnamed reason that you just can't put down the book you read at night before you turn out the light. It's probably one of the reasons you share your friend's soul-stirring Facebook post. Acts of redemption bring tears to our eyes, put a lump in our throat, and often cause us to make the daily choices in our lives with a bit more care and intentionality.

One example of this sort of care and intentionality comes from the small town where I grew up, Ludington, Michigan. Ludington is a beach town of about ten thousand people on the shores of Lake Michigan. It's best described as typical small-town America, where you actually grow up knowing your neighbors and the score of the high school basketball game.

A few years ago, a mid-thirties man named Jim began an intense battle for his life against a rare form of leukemia. Jim and his wife, April, who were both employed at one of the town's factories, spent their days traveling to a hospital nearly two hours away because the local hospital didn't offer the specific treatment he needed. Both time and travel became a burden for the young couple. It quickly chewed up all of their employer-allotted vacation days. As you can imagine, when one person is receiving invasive medical care and battling for his life, the other can't

Redemption comes with a cost—but its impact is immeasurable.

afford to miss work and ultimately lose her source of income and health insurance.

The young couple was stuck.

Until their coworkers came up with an idea to help. Men and women from around the factory started to pool their vacation days. One worker gave three days, another four, and so it went. When the tally was complete, April received eighty-seven extra vacation days to care for her ailing husband.

Because their coworkers paid a ransom, Jim and April were able to enjoy months of freedom from the pressures and rigors of work to battle Jim's affliction together.

Redemption comes with a cost—but its impact is immeasurable.

Likely, you realized this cost when you first came to faith in Jesus. As you grasped the cost that Jesus paid for you on the cross, you were blown away! You were amazed at God's gift to you. Sadly, over time your amazement has probably waned. You're no longer as emotionally charged about your own redemption. Perhaps it has become an understood fact of your faith journey. Jesus paid the price, I received the benefit, and we all move on.

Sure, we're thankful. But if we're honest, it's easy to take our redemption for granted. The bumps and bruises, the scrapes and scars of everyday life, rob us of our ability to truly reflect on our own redemption. Ultimately, this robs us of our gratitude toward the giver of that redemption—God. I know this is true of my own faith journey.

I'm often reminded of this fact when I experience afresh the grace of our Lord Jesus as I participate in the Lord's Supper. The bread and the wine (or grape juice, depending on your denomination) of communion, are not magical elements. They're quite ordinary, frankly. But it's in this holy space, within the communion experience, that I'm drawn back to

the cross anew. It beckons me to remember, once again, the ransom that Jesus paid to set me free. The smell, the texture, and the taste of the elements symbolize redemption.

These are also the moments when I'm most aware of the cost Jesus paid for my brothers and sisters in Christ as well. When I see a sanctuary full of believers genuinely entering into their story of redemption through their participation in communion, I'm often moved to tears.

Try it for yourself. The next time you experience the Lord's Supper, take a moment to look around you. Allow yourself to be reminded that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was for you—and for all of his people. It was a sacrifice for a chosen people who have been redeemed—and are being redeemed—for God's glory.

SO WHAT?

In our sin-stained world, situations of people in need of redemption are often right in front of us. Our kids play basketball with their kids at the YMCA. Our cube is next to their cube in the office. We send banal instant messages to them through Facebook.

Opportunities to offer acts of redemption pass us by like cars on the hectic morning commute. They present themselves in staff meetings. They enter into our casual conversations with friends after school and on the golf course. They are spelled out in front of us as we barbeque with neighbors. Why do we so rarely enter into these opportunities? Why do we shy away from getting involved in another's life? Why are we unwilling to be agents of God's grace and redemption?

I believe there are two primary answers to these questions. And both are a bit unsettling.

First, we struggle to believe in redemption ourselves. We know the depths of our "stuff." Wounds we've dealt others.

Promises we've struggled to keep. Goals we've never reached. We know too well, and too painfully, the brokenness in our own lives. These bruises and scars of our sin cause us to doubt our own redemption. Did Jesus really pay for *all* my sin? How can I truly be released from sin's captivity eternally, when I still struggle with sin week after week right now?

These are honest, real, authentic questions. Yet they are questions that actually have answers rooted in Scripture. And these answers offer a resounding "Yes, Christ's death on the cross paid for *all* your sins! You have been, and are being, redeemed."⁹

The payment Jesus made to set you free changes everything about you! It changes your history (your sins are forgiven), your present (you're free to live the grace-filled life God's called you to live), and your future (an eternity with him). As a believer, you have been redeemed and linked with a heritage that reaches back thousands of years. You are part of God's redeemed community—a people chosen by God, belonging to God, submitted to God's purposes. You are part of God's church. It's an unfinished, broken, and redeemed work-in-progress. But God is working on it.

The problem is that our doubt not only plays with our head, but also deadens our heart of compassion and our hands of service as well. If we're struggling to believe in our own redemption, how can we possibly offer redemption to someone else?

In the early 1900s, a young Scottish minister named Oswald Chambers spoke to a Bible college class and offered this challenge: "Our practical life is to be moulded by our belief in the Redemption, and our declared message will be in accordance with our belief."¹⁰ We must truly believe in redemption. Genuinely experience it. Honestly express it. Then actively offer redemption to another because we believe!

The Foundation

The second reason is our unwillingness to pay the price for another's redemption. We ask ourselves, will the ransom of my time, inconvenience, emotions, and money be too much to pay? Sure, we might recognize a need, but far too often we choose to sidestep the cost. We make the easy move—and move on. Our self-centered response causes us to run away and hide. We do nothing.

This is wrong!

Instead, a genuine experience with our redemption should compel us to action. And this action should begin within the family of God. Because of this redemption we are willing to sacrifice for the deepest needs of others. The impact of God's redemption is different for those within the community of faith. It causes us to offer grace to those with whom we worship on Sunday. It causes us to offer forgiveness to those we gather with for prayer and Bible study on Wednesday evening. And it causes us to love and persevere with those we rub shoulders with at the local rescue mission on Saturday morning.

A healthy church, at its core, is a group of redeemed Christ followers—recognizing each other's place in God's unfinished church—living in authentic, honest, forgiving, grace-giving community.

Remember the bishop in *Les Misérables*? He bought Jean Valjean's freedom, and then he exhorted Jean to use that freedom for good. As a recipient of God's amazing redemption, are you living out the bishop's exhortation?

Church History

The truths discussed in this chapter have deep roots in the history of God's church. Consider the following example as you engage with these truths.

HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

86. We have been delivered from our misery by God's grace alone through Christ and not because we have earned it: Why then must we still do good?

To be sure, Christ has redeemed us by his blood. But we do good because Christ by his Spirit is also renewing us to be like himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us. And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ.¹¹

Music

The themes discussed in this chapter have been expressed in both traditional and contemporary music. Below are a few titles to encourage you as you reflect on these themes.

"Your Redeeming Love," by Mark Altrogge

"I Have Been Redeemed," by Wendy O'Connell

"Children of God" (Third Day), by Justin Thomas Daly

"I Will Glory in My Redeemer," by Steve and Vikki Cook

Questions for Discussion

These questions have been developed for you to consider personally, answer honestly, and discuss openly—engaging your head and your heart—as you process the truths of this chapter together in community.

1. Have you ever truly considered the price Jesus paid for you? Whether it's the first time or the ten-thousandth time, take a few moments to contemplate the cross and Jesus's painful sacrifice that redeemed you. Discuss or journal an image or feeling that comes from your time of meditation.

The Foundation

2. Take another look at the biblical passages in this chapter that connect your lineage with that of Abraham. How do these passages influence your view of God? His plan? Your place in his story?

3. In Genesis 12:1–3, God’s chosen people, the nation of Israel, were called to be a blessing to others. Since you are part of God’s chosen people, how is he accomplishing his plan of redemption through you? Explain with examples.

4. Jesus also gave his life for the people sitting around you. How might that cause you to view them differently? How might it cause you to love or serve them differently? Explain.

“I LOVE JESUS BUT HATE THE CHURCH.”

We hear this kind of talk all the time, but what if it’s profoundly mistaken? Rob Bentz challenges readers to rethink this popular—yet ultimately harmful—mentality.

Drawing on his experience as a pastor, Bentz helps those disenchanted with the church to rediscover its importance for the Christian life by examining the biblical, theological, and historical reasons why Christ’s followers should embrace gospel-centered community—even when it’s hard.

Honest yet hopeful, *The Unfinished Church* provides an encouraging look at God’s ultimate building project: his church.

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MARK GALLI, Editor, *Christianity Today*

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