

# REDEMPTION

FREED BY JESUS FROM THE IDOLS WE WORSHIP  
AND THE WOUNDS WE CARRY

**MIKE WILKERSON**

**FOREWORD BY MARK DRISCOLL**

*Redemption: Freed by Jesus from the Idols We Worship and the Wounds We Carry*

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Patrick Mahoney of The Mahoney Design Team

First printing 2011

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-2077-8

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2078-5

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2087-7

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2088-4

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wilkerson, Mike, 1977–

Redemption : freed by Jesus from the idols we worship and the wounds we carry / Mike Wilkerson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-2077-8 (tpb)

1. Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity—Textbooks.

2. Redemption—Christianity—Textbooks. 3. Exodux, The—Textbooks.

I. Title.

BV4909.W539 2011

248.8'6—dc22

2010031363

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Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11			
14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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# FOREWORD

“I suffer, therefore I am.”

René Descartes likely should have penned these words rather than “I think, therefore I am” as the essence of what it means to be human. From the sins committed against us in thought, word, deed, and motive, through commission and omission, we suffer. And we add to our suffering through our sinful responses to sin.

The result, to use very biblical language, is slavery. We become enslaved to sin and it rules over us, beating us mercilessly like Pharaoh beat God’s people in Egypt. Those of us graced to serve the abused and assaulted are continually wrecked by the stories people tell us of their lives. We see it in their eyes, hear it in their voices, and see it on their bodies.

At Mars Hill Church, the new converts we have welcomed over the years, in addition to the Christians who have never really told their deep, dark secret to anyone, have each come with tragic tales to tell as they limp toward the kingdom. Among the women alone, we have enough who were raped and abused before coming to our church to comprise their own megachurch. In addition, we have been continually overwhelmed with people stuck in idolatry, also known as addiction, which results in self-selected slavery to such things as sex, drugs, alcohol, food, gambling, and pornography. Added to their number are those suffering from assorted other sins and hurts. It is continually devastating to see the desperate and urgent need that even seemingly normal Christians have for redemption from sin and its effects.

Our experience is not uncommon as pastors and ministry leaders around the world have a front row seat to the wreckage of human depravity. While cohosting the Dr. Drew national radio program, I was surprised that Dr. Drew was concerned that the issues raised by the abused and addicted callers would be too much for a pastor to bear. The truth is that pastors,

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counselors, and other Christians on the front lines of ministry deal with deeply broken people all the time, and there is nothing on radio or television that we have not heard before in face-to-face conversations.

Our experience at Mars Hill is not unique. Sin and suffering cross all national, racial, gender, generational, social, economic, and stylistic differences. I am writing this foreword while on a plane; I am returning from preaching in Africa. I awoke today and sat down to read the newspaper in Johannesburg. The headlines in the small twenty-eight-page newspaper are horrifying, and most are related to a chauvinistic rape culture of violence against women:

“Three babies a week left for dead at Pretoria dumping site.”

“Legal abortions needed.”

“Teenagers can get help with unwanted babies.”

“Newborn found in smoldering dumpster.”

“Man arrested for raping daughter.”

“Judge nails youth leader over sexist outbursts.”

Yesterday, when I was in a township of 200,000 people, established during the days of apartheid, I was told that in many of the shacks were poor and desperate young women. For three or four dollars I was told you could buy one for the day and do whatever you wanted to her. As I write this, I’m shaking and holding back tears as I think about my own twelve-year-old daughter being raped for an entire day for a few bucks.

The question is: What can we do as parents, friends, spouses, grandparents, counselors, ministry leaders, and pastors to aid those suffering from addiction, abuse, and assorted other suffering? One thing we cannot do is save. Only Jesus can save from sin and death, and so we must always remind ourselves that we serve the Savior, but we are not the savior.

Another thing we cannot do is solve. Sin is too pernicious and deeply embedded in human life and human cultures to be solved in this life. Only the Holy Spirit truly knows the human heart and can change the human condition. Sin is foolish, as the Bible teaches, and it defies all logic; it is not merely a problem to be solved like mathematics.

What we can do is serve. We can be, by the grace of God, the loving eyes, serving hands, and liberating mouth of Jesus Christ. We can tell a story of redemption that is, in fact, the story of the Bible. This good news is far

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superior to despising others for sin, excusing sin, hiding sin, partially confessing sin, denying sin, becoming defined by sin, minimizing sin, giving in to sin, being ruled by sin, accepting sin, or ignoring sin, because this good news actually redeems from sin when accompanied by a lifestyle of humble and biblical faith and repentance. And by the grace of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can witness the powerful biblical story of redemption to transform someone's life story into a story of Jesus' redemption.

*Redemption* is not just a book about redemption in the Bible. It is also a book about biblical redemption in our lives. This book is for everyone to read at least twice. Everyone needs to read it first for themselves. Then they should read it again for others.

*Redemption* was written by my friend and fellow Mars Hill pastor Mike Wilkerson. He has given his life to counseling people through redemption and training paid and unpaid ministry leaders at our church and other churches in biblical redemption. He has read broadly on counseling to reject that which is both fundamental and liberal in an effort to receive that which is biblical. He has devotedly placed himself under the teaching and consulting of some of the finest preachers, teachers, and writers in the world who are committed to God's Son, God's Word, God's people, God's Spirit, and God's grace to transform people for God's glory. Among those who have been particularly helpful are our friends at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation.

Pastor Mike Wilkerson has written this book because I have asked him to. He is not writing it because he is proud or desiring to establish a name for himself. Rather, he is a pastor faithfully serving a great need as requested. I have seen him labor through the writing process but continue because the content is vital to our church. By God's grace I hope it will also be a genuine service to other Christians, churches, and ministries. The content you will find in *Redemption* is culled from the hundreds of Redemption Groups led by mainly unpaid church leaders that are run based on the gospel as applied in this book in Mars Hill and other churches. Simply, it is battle tested and the kind of information that aids in transformation. We hope it can help you as you help others for God's glory, their good, and your joy.

—Mark Driscoll, Pastor,  
Mars Hill Church, Seattle





# INTRODUCTION

Redemption. The word is so familiar its meaning is often taken for granted. In everyday use it suggests recovery, repayment, rescue, or vindication. But what does that look like in real life with real people who are broken, wounded, or addicted? Here's a true story of one man's need for redemption.

In a prison filled with thieves and murderers serving life sentences or awaiting execution, there is one innocent man. He is a slave, imprisoned on false rape charges alleged by his former master's wife. When she tried to seduce him, he ran; so she sentenced him with a lie. But this was not the first betrayal that had cost him his freedom.

He had grown up in a household where he was favored by a doting father and hated by jealous older brothers. Occasionally, he dreamed that he would one day rule over his brothers. Infuriated by his delusions of grandeur and their father's favoritism, his brothers plotted a terrible betrayal. They beat him up, threw him into a hole in the ground, and eventually sold him into slavery to the man whose adulterous wife would betray him again.

His name was Joseph and his story is told in the book of Genesis.<sup>1</sup> Your story has different details, but you probably know something about unjust suffering, betrayal, abuse, abandonment, or despair. You may even know the experience of being trapped in an abusive situation, a sort of prison, against your will. Or you've experienced the slavery and imprisonment of addiction. Whatever the case, you know that something has gone terribly wrong in the world, and this confronts you every day. You strain to make sense of it all; you search for answers.

## LIVING STORIES

Life demands explanation, and the more intense the experience, the stronger the demand. "Why me?" has probably been on the lips of every victim and "What's wrong with me?" on the lips of every desperate addict.

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We are *meaning-makers*, hard-wired to interpret life.<sup>2</sup> As Paul Tripp says, “We do not live our lives based on the bare facts of our existence; we live our lives according to our *interpretation* of those facts.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, it’s not our raw experiences that determine our lives but the meaning we make of them—the stories we tell and the stories we believe. Out of those stories, we live our lives.

Abuse and addiction are two particularly intense experiences we tend to build stories around. A third broader category of experiences is what I’ll call *assorted trouble*—any combination of intense experiences of sinning or suffering that may not fit under the headings of *abuse* or *addiction* per se but nonetheless have exerted powerful influences on our story forming. Let’s have a closer look at each of these.

### *Stories of Abuse*

There are an estimated thirty-nine million survivors of childhood sexual abuse in America today.<sup>4</sup> Sixteen percent of boys and 25 percent of girls are sexually abused by age eighteen.<sup>5</sup> About 28 percent of children have been physically abused, up to 30 percent of boys in general.<sup>6</sup> Of these, only 10 percent are abused by strangers. The rest are abused by family members or trusted friends of the family. It is this betrayal of trust inherent in child abuse that does the most damage, such as when the parent who should be a trustworthy protector becomes the perpetrator.<sup>7</sup> The pain of child abuse extends far beyond physical or sexual damage; *betrayal of trust* sends shockwaves of anguish, fear, anger, rage, and temptations to react throughout the victim’s life.<sup>8</sup>

Some are abused as adults—one day living life in a seemingly normal world, and the next, jarred by evil. On college campuses as many as one in five women are raped.<sup>9</sup> The violation of dignity and the stripping of any sense of safety in the world can linger and haunt for a lifetime. One woman I counseled was abused as an adult by a man whom she met at church. He befriended her, gained her trust, and then kidnapped her, violated her, and left her for dead. After being found by detectives, she fled her home country. The kidnapper had stolen and sabotaged her identity, using it to commit fraud. She now lives every day far from home with a lingering sense of danger all around.

My heart breaks when, in counseling and in groups, I hear story after story of abuse told by men and women whose lives have been so utterly devastated at the hands of evildoers. Yet what is even more devastating than the abuse itself is the way some have allowed it to define their lives: nursing bitterness; committing to revenge; desperately searching—even demanding!—affirmation against deep-seated, stubborn insecurities; believing that “I must have deserved this,” carrying guilt that belongs to the abuser alone; believing that “*victim* is who I am at the core.”

Even the word *abuse* is sometimes granted almost magical explanatory power, as if labeling something as abuse unlocks the deep meaning to explain what’s wrong in our lives. Some reach for this word to label virtually any kind of suffering at the hands of another. Yet, as one biblical counselor cautions, “if *everything* is abuse, then nothing is abuse.”<sup>10</sup> Using the term too broadly can trivialize the tragic reality of real abuse. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t find the right words to describe the suffering we *have* endured. We need to be able to talk about it, grieve it, and find grace and mercy in our time of need.

David Powlison suggests that we identify *abuse* as one particular evil among many. He asks: “Were you used? misused? abused? mistreated? betrayed? sinned against? done evil?”<sup>11</sup> Abuse, when seen in this context, is not an “all-determining, all-damning, all-condemning, all-controlling force.”<sup>12</sup> It is, rather, one particularly terrible evil among many other evils that befall us in a broken world.

### *Stories of Addiction*

Addiction is rampant:

- More than 70 percent of men ages eighteen to thirty-four visit a pornographic Web site in a typical month.<sup>13</sup>
- Forty-seven percent of families have said pornography is a problem in their home.<sup>14</sup>
- Twenty-eight percent of those admitting to sexual addiction are women.<sup>15</sup>
- Nearly eighteen million Americans (8.5 % of adults) meet the diagnostic criteria for alcohol abuse or alcoholism.<sup>16</sup>
- Nearly one out of five workers (19%) age eighteen to twenty-five used illicit drugs during the past month.<sup>17</sup>

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Sex, alcohol, and drugs are only the most familiar addictions; we can get addicted to anything. One addiction-awareness Web site lists no fewer than twenty-eight varieties: alongside the usual—drugs, alcohol, and porn—are shopping, sugar, and video games.<sup>18</sup>

At one level, addictions defy all explanation; what could ever explain such foolish self-destruction? Yet, at the same time, they demand explanation; we want to know *why* because we believe that knowing will help us to break free or help others break free. So stories to explain addiction abound.

Some see addiction as a disease, a function of biology, chemistry, or genetics. This is the story told by some medical treatment programs. Shick Shadel Hospital, for example, makes the bold claim: “Give us 10 days; we’ll give you back your life.”<sup>19</sup> Driving their treatment program is their definition of addiction: “A compulsive physiological need for a habit forming substance . . . a neurological disease, not a mental or moral problem.”<sup>20</sup>

Some see addiction as the consequence of low self-esteem and unmet needs. Patrick Carnes proposes that all sex addicts hold the following core beliefs:

- I am basically a bad, unworthy person.
- No one would love me as I am.
- My needs are never going to be met if I have to depend on others.
- Sex is my most important need.<sup>21</sup>

Some believe their addiction is an irreversible fact of life and can be managed only by healthy habits. I talked with one man who through AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) had stopped abusing alcohol. Unfortunately, in the process, he gained a new addiction: his preoccupation with sobriety. I heard the same story from another man who’d spent years in SA (Sexaholics Anonymous); it was a misguided attempt to replace sex with sobriety. Whether each of these men ran to the addiction, strained to break free, or managed to keep a sober distance, the addiction was always at the center, defining life.<sup>22</sup>

### *Assorted Trouble*

Trouble is a catchall category for any kind of sin or suffering that you might experience.<sup>23</sup> While abuse is a particularly acute form of suffering, suffering

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comes in many serious forms. Even if abuse isn't the best label for what has happened to you, you may still have been sinned against in ways that have left lasting wounds. In addition to such personal suffering as abuse, there are ways we suffer that don't involve another person's sin against us: physical illness, natural disaster, or the loss of a job in a down economy.

There may be a habitual sin pattern in your life that you wouldn't call an addiction *per se*. Yet, much like an addiction, you find yourself foolishly falling into the same pattern of sin over and over again. So while your problem may be different in *degree* from abuse or addiction, it may not be so different in *kind*. It's all trouble; all trouble has much in common (see 1 Cor. 10:13), and each of us experiences it.

Just consider the following statistics. Even if you don't find yourself in these numbers, by the time you consider your close family—parents, spouse, children—chances increase that you are or will be affected by the trouble of someone close to you.

- *Alcohol*: More than one-half of American adults have a close family member who has or has had alcoholism. Approximately one in four children in the U.S. under eighteen years old is exposed to alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence in the family. Children of alcoholics are significantly more likely to initiate drinking during adolescence and to develop alcohol use disorders.<sup>24</sup>
- *Eating Disorders*. An estimated 0.5 to 3.7 percent of women engage in disorderly eating that could be labeled anorexia nervosa in their lifetime, and for 1.1 to 4.2 percent as bulimia nervosa.<sup>25</sup> The diagnoses of up to ten million females and one million males are considered life threatening.<sup>26</sup>
- *Anxiety*: More than forty million people exhibit the symptoms of anxiety disorders each year.<sup>27</sup>
- *Cutting*. Fifteen to 20 percent of adolescents have engaged in self-injury.<sup>28</sup>
- *Depression and Suicide*. At an average college with 18,000 undergraduate students, some 1,080 of them will seriously consider committing suicide at least once within a single year.<sup>29</sup> Nearly one in ten adults could be diagnosed with clinical depression each year.<sup>30</sup>
- *Mental Illness*. Almost 20 percent of children grow up with a mental illness in their home.<sup>31</sup>
- *Adultery and Divorce*. Half the children born to married parents in 2000 are expected before they turn eighteen to see their parents divorce.

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Children of divorced parents show higher rates of crime, drug abuse, suicide, school dropout, and becoming victims of abuse.<sup>32</sup> Twenty-five percent of all marriages are affected by adultery.<sup>33</sup>

Fill in the blank with your own trouble. You are surrounded by it. It is impossible to live life on the earth and not be stung by sin and suffering. Even more sobering is the fact that you are certainly the cause of some of that trouble to others around you.

Abuse, addiction, and assorted trouble send us searching for answers, explanations, and stories to make meaning of it all. We need to know the story that makes sense of life, the story about a personal Redeemer who offers hope for real redemption. This is the story of God as told in the Bible.

### **GOD'S STORY IS ABOUT GOD**

Here's what's surprising about making sense of *your* life in *God's* story: the story is not about you—it's about him.<sup>34</sup> He is both the author and the main character, and he has written you into his story to say something about him. Yet, if we are honest, we tend to script our lives with ourselves as the protagonists and God in some supporting (or possibly antagonistic) role.

Often, God is cast as a mere extra. At best, he adds to the background action; at worst, he's overlooked. Some have written God into the story as an absent father who pays no attention to the damage being done to his child. Some have made him out to be a therapist whose job it is to prop up their self-esteem. Some treat God as debtor, holding him responsible for their pain and believing they are owed a free pass for sins of pleasure and escape in trade for their undeserved suffering. Others live a life of despair in a world they believe is controlled by a heartless mastermind, pulling the strings of the universe with no compassion for people afflicted by evil. Some treat God as though he were the source of a better high or a better escape than their drug of choice.

For others, he is known as “the God of our understanding,” and they call upon him for help to walk away from an addiction.<sup>35</sup> Of course, coming to God with our broken lives is good—there's no better place to go—but we must be careful not to come to the right place with the wrong idea. Even more urgent, we must be careful not to come to the wrong God altogether; guided as we are by our distorted understanding of who he is.

Rather than trying to write God into our stories, we would be wiser to sit patiently with our Father and let him tell us his. We would surely find ourselves in his story and learn that we are not defined by our hurts or our sins, as we may have believed. As he tells us his story, we must be willing to let go of the stories we've told to make sense of our lives. We must let his story rewrite ours and sweep us up into something much greater than ourselves.

Joseph's life was shattered and fragmented, betrayed by his brothers and falsely accused by Potiphar's wife. We can assume he carried a lot of pain and asked a lot of questions. Yet when he later faced his brothers, he said to them, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

Despite his terrible suffering, Joseph had come to know God as the main character of his life's story and that God's purposes toward him were good. In retrospect, Joseph glimpsed God's redemptive plan, and this helped him make sense of his relationship with his brothers. Yet God didn't grant Joseph this insight until later on. While in prison, Joseph didn't have a clue; he could only trust God.

You may feel like you are still sitting in prison, crying out to be released. Take comfort in knowing that you are a character in the same story as Joseph, authored by the same Redeemer. Your hope need not rest in making sense of it all; rather, you are invited to set your hope of redemption in the Redeemer.

## **GOD'S STORY ANSWERS LIFE'S QUESTIONS**

While God's story is ultimately about him, it is also about you and me and the world we inhabit. It gives us a worldview, a way of understanding life and all reality, including human nature—its important features, problems and causes, solutions, and the overarching goal for which we are meant to aspire.<sup>36</sup>

God's story moves "from creation to new creation by way of *redemption*, which is, in effect, the renewing of creation."<sup>37</sup> This pattern—creation, fall, redemption—will guide the following brief survey of God's story as we seek answers to our questions.<sup>38</sup> In a later section, "Redemption as Renewal," we'll see how God's story culminates in new creation.

*Creation: What Does It Mean to Be Human?*

Fixing a broken thing requires some knowledge of its design. Likewise, any attempt to address human brokenness requires some understanding of what it means to be human. So we will begin where humanity was designed, at creation, recorded in the book of Genesis.

First, to be human is to be created.<sup>39</sup> “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Even before creation, there is God (“In the beginning, God”). Therefore, Creation isn’t even the beginning of God’s story; all of creation—including humanity—begins somewhere in the midst of God’s story. He was already there with a story before there was anything else at all. So once again, we creatures do not add the Creator to our stories; he has created us and added us to his.

Second, to be human is to live always before the face of God. Relationship to God is essential to what it means to be human, not just in the Christian sense (your *personal* relationship with God) but as creation relates to Creator. He made you a fundamentally related-to-God being, whether you know it or not.

Human life plays out on God’s stage, before his eyes. Even our thoughts, motives, desires, and emotions are before his eyes, “for the LORD searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought” (1 Chron. 28:9). Every movement of your outward *and* inward life—every movement of your physical body—somehow moves in relationship to him.

I am on a plane as I write this. Suppose we were to hit some turbulence and I were gripped with fear. If you were to talk with me about it later—and you wanted to address the full reality and humanity of my experience—we couldn’t simply talk about survival instincts, past experiences, or statistics about plane flight. The most significant aspect of that experience would be what my fear says in relation to God. Not to talk about that would be *subhuman*.<sup>40</sup> Do I believe God is near or far from me in that moment? Do I believe he cares about my trouble? Or do I believe he is indifferent? Do I believe that he controls what will happen or that he is as uncertain and helpless as me? You never have fears all to yourself; you have fears only in relationship to God. Theologians call this *coram Deo*, living all of life before the face of God.<sup>41</sup>

Third, to be human is to bear the image of God. “Then God said,



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‘Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness’” (Gen. 1:26). To be made in the image and likeness of God means you are designed to represent God, to make him known, to reflect his glory like a mirror, to look like him. God has made every human being in such a way that simply *being human* could make his presence known.

For this reason, you have great dignity as a human being, not primarily because of your own goodness but because you are made of the kind of stuff that is capable of making God’s much greater goodness visible to others. This is the bedrock upon which the enduring dignity of every person is established—no matter how sinful, abused, impaired, or oppressed. Male and female from the womb, every race—we are all created in his image and likeness.

Fourth, to be human is to worship. We reflect God’s glory by our worship of him, which means to hold him as the object of our deepest desires and as worthy of our imitation. Worship is not just singing songs in church; it’s how we live our lives every moment of every day—every thought, word, deed, feeling, and desire. You worship what you live for, whatever is most worthy of your attention and devotion.<sup>42</sup> It is what drives you at the core, and it flows from the essence of who you are.

You can’t turn off worship. It’s your basic human wiring. To not worship is to not live. It’s like a garden hose stuck on full blast. You can aim it at the grass, the car, or the shrubs, but you cannot stop its flow.

Or you might imagine yourself as a sort of human billboard, always advertising what you find to be important, valuable, worthy. What you pay attention to, how you spend your time, the way you work, how you relate to others in your life—all these things broadcast your heart’s worship, making visible and advertising what is most important to you. God created you to broadcast him.

Fifth, to be human is to long for shalom. The universal peace, harmony, and wholeness of God’s original design of humankind and the whole earth are conveyed by the Hebrew word *shalom* in the Bible (e.g., Isa. 32:14–20).<sup>43</sup> Cornelius Plantinga describes shalom as “the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight . . . a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and

Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights.”<sup>44</sup> We have an inborn sense of shalom. It is home, and we long to return.

## THE FALL: WHERE EVERYTHING WENT WRONG

It is perhaps *because* of this inborn sense of shalom that we are so grieved by the world in which we now live. You feel it in your gut and you see the evidence all around you and in you: the world is not the way it’s supposed to be.<sup>45</sup>

It all began with the appearance of the Serpent in the garden, telling a different story.<sup>46</sup> The Serpent—Satan, the rebel-deceiver—moved in to spread his lies and rebellion to the fledgling human race. He invited Adam and Eve into his own way of understanding. He suggested that God is not as good as God had made himself out to be. He flatly denied the consequences of disobeying God (Gen. 3:1, 4). He even suggested an advantage to disobeying God: “You will be like God” (v. 5). In the first and greatest tragedy in the history of humankind, Adam and Eve believed the Serpent’s story, and in their sin they rose up against God in attempt to become gods, just as the Serpent had done before (v. 6).

But it was a lie.

God’s words had been true. So the consequences of their sin followed God’s story, not the Serpent’s.

Immediately, their eyes were opened and they realized they were naked (v. 7). They hid themselves from God’s presence and were afraid because of their nakedness (vv. 8, 10). God cursed the Serpent (vv. 14–15). The woman would know greater pain in childbearing and frustration in her relationship to her husband (v. 16). The man’s work would be frustrated by God’s cursing of the ground, and God’s people were driven out of the garden (vv. 17, 23).

What happened here? How could Adam and Eve go from the sheer bliss of living in the good garden under God’s blessing to all-out rebellion? Surely, before the Serpent’s lies entered the garden Adam and Eve were content to enjoy God and steward shalom as his image bearers. But the Serpent’s story cast a shadow on their experience and offered to interpret their (already perfect) lives by lies: “Something is missing. God withholds his best. Why should you be satisfied living *under* God, when you could live *as* God?”

Behold the power of a story to define—and distort—life.

### *Sin Unravels God's Creation*

Sin is not just the breaking of some Sunday school do's and don'ts. It is not the violation of some impersonal cosmic code of morality. Sin is a personal offense against the Creator. It unravels and corrupts God's creation. Consider how sin corrupts each aspect of creation introduced above.

First, sin distorts the distinction between Creator and created. We put ourselves at the center of the universe and the center of the story. We attempt to be god, defining good and evil for ourselves. We deify creation, trying to turn created things into gods (see Rom. 1:25).

Second, sin erodes our awareness of life lived always before the face of God (*coram Deo*). When this, the very platform for all life, is eroded, the results are pervasive, both at the individual level and at the broader, cultural level. At the individual level, we can become self-sufficient and autonomous, as if there is no one on whom we must depend and to whom we must give account for our lives. Culturally, worldviews emerge to explain reality in ways that are disconnected from a personal creator and sustainer. They explain human composition, motivation, and goals purely in terms of biology, social dynamics, or psychological needs. In turn, individuals who need help with their broken lives end up embracing ways of seeing their problems and solutions that are not shaped by the knowledge of God. This happens even within the church where agnostic theories are sometimes merely "baptized" in Christian lingo and then lived out.<sup>47</sup>

Third, sin corrupts the image of God in mankind and treats it with contempt. The image of God in man was not lost in the fall but marred and distorted (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). In a sense, it would be less tragic if it had been utterly lost. Instead, with the very capacities God gave us to image him and steward his creation, we defame his name, vandalize his world, and violate his image in others, which amounts to treason. In so doing, we, in fact, image that arch rebel, Satan. Abuse, abortion, racism, and genocide are so heinous precisely because they violate the very image of God.

Fourth, sin corrupts worship. The result? Not a ceasing of worship but a distortion of it. We never stop worshiping. Rather, in sin, we worship anything and everything other than God. We tend to exalt a substance, an experience, a person, or a dream to the level of a god. We

define life by its attainment, and we feel like dying when it eludes us. It becomes bigger in our eyes than God himself and takes his place in our lives. The Bible calls this “idolatry.” So addictions, for example, aren’t just drug, alcohol, food, or pornography problems. They are worship disorders.<sup>48</sup> They flow from hearts bent on worshipping created things rather than the Creator.

Fifth, sin spoils shalom.<sup>49</sup> Eden was the epicenter of a sin pandemic that has since enveloped the whole world. What began with Adam has spread to all people (Rom. 5:12). There is no one and nowhere left untouched. Shalom is spoiled not just by the sin I commit but also by the sins committed against me: the abuse, mistreatment, betrayal, lies, and abandonment.<sup>50</sup> It is important that we see both sides of this, because, as David Powlison warns, reducing the problem of sin to just one of these aspects has a blinding effect: either we become blind to God’s compassion and mercy for our suffering, or we become blind to our responsibility for sin we commit.<sup>51</sup>

Some of the victims of abuse I’ve counseled have the clearest grasp on this. They have been terribly wounded by the sins of another. Yet they have also sinned in response—in bitterness, revenge, or promiscuity—at times even abusing others just as they had themselves been abused.

## JESUS IS YOUR REDEMPTION

How can sin be overcome and shalom restored? To answer that question is to define redemption. And no Christian should be surprised by the biblical answer: Jesus himself is our redemption (1 Cor. 1:30; see also Rom. 3:23–24; Gal. 4:4–5; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12).

Redemption is not a series of steps we practice or rules we follow. It is not the forced motions of religious practice. No human effort can accomplish redemption for oneself or anyone else. We need a Redeemer. Just as God’s story is not ultimately about you but about God, so also redemption comes not from you but from God. God’s story is about redemption. But more specifically it is about a Redeemer. Jesus is the main character of the story, and his life and work are the center of the plot.

For some, hearing the words “Jesus is your redemption” rings a bell and piques curiosity (“Tell me more!”) For others, the same words seem hol-

low. They may have heard them a thousand times in sermons and Sunday school. But when real evil overwhelms, it just doesn't seem to work. At that point, they tend to move in one of two directions: they either pay lip service and pretend it's working to keep fitting in at church or grow cynical and leave. Either way, their hearts go in search of other solutions.<sup>52</sup> This is tragic, because it means they stray from their true hope at just the time when they most need it.

How is it that we can hear the words that *define* hope and yet not hear the hope they offer? I think it's partially due to a lack of context.<sup>53</sup> You can hear the climax of God's story—"Jesus is your redemption"—but a climax without context just doesn't pop.

Consider the movie *The Return of the King*, based on J. R. R. Tolkien's book by the same title. Imagine you knew nothing of the story and all you saw was a clip with some Hobbits clawing their way up a volcano to destroy a gold ring in its fire. A friend tells you that this is the part where they save the whole world, and you're thinking: "What does a gold ring have to do with the fate of the world?" Well, it's all in the back story. If you knew the story, you'd be on the edge of your seat. When it comes to understanding redemption, the key back story in the Bible is the exodus.<sup>54</sup>

## THE EXODUS AS GOD'S MODEL OF REDEMPTION

When the New Testament authors wrote about Jesus as our redemption, the Old Testament story they had in mind was the exodus, the prototype of redemption.<sup>55</sup>

Christopher J. H. Wright says:

If you had asked a devout Israelite in the Old Testament period "Are you redeemed?" the answer would have been a most definite yes. And if you had asked "How do you know?" you would be taken aside to sit down somewhere while your friend recounted a long and exciting story—the story of the exodus. For indeed it is the exodus that provided the primary model of God's idea of redemption, not just in the Old Testament but even in the New, where it is used as one of the keys to understanding the meaning of the cross of Christ.<sup>56</sup>

Exodus is more than one story of redemption; it also points to the larger story of redemption. Wright also says:

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[The exodus] points beyond itself to a greater need for deliverance from the totality of evil and restoration to relationship with God than it achieved by itself. Such a deliverance was accomplished by Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.<sup>57</sup>

So read Exodus expecting fresh insight into the truth that Jesus is your redemption. Immerse yourself in the drama as you would with any good story. Identify with the characters and the situations they faced. Encounter your Redeemer—not an abstract religious concept but a compassionate, powerful, steadfast, loving, and personal God who pursues and redeems his people.

Let's look at three related themes of redemption enacted by the exodus story: deliverance, ransom, and renewal. By considering each, we'll learn a bit more about what redemption involves and where it applies to our lives. We'll also get a survey of the exodus story and get a feel for how it points forward to Christ.

### *Redemption as Deliverance*

Deliverance is about movement from slavery to freedom, from bondage in sin to life in God. According to Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, “Redemption is synonymous with being liberated, freed, or rescued from bondage and slavery to a person or thing.”<sup>58</sup>

Merriam-Webster defines *slave* as “one that is completely subservient to a dominating influence.”<sup>59</sup> “Whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved,” wrote the apostle Peter (2 Pet. 2:19). And John wrote, “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). Our enemy seeks to overwhelm us with evil and take us captive.

If you've been abused, you may relate to the metaphor of slavery: being overcome by evil, taken captive against your will, and plunged into a world of pain, confusion, and fear. The wounds of abuse can be dominating influences, complicating relationships with people, sometimes resulting in difficulty trusting others, preoccupation with others' approval, or feeling alone in the world. It can also result in a seemingly irresistible urge to grow bitter or seek revenge.

If you've been addicted, you may also relate to the slavery metaphor. Your life has been out of control, dominated by the influence of the addic-

tion. Perhaps, despite your desire to be free, you've gone back again and again to the addiction. It has cost you dearly—money, pain, and relationships—and has left you in misery beneath a load of guilt and shame. This is slavery; yet it's slavery you've chosen. It is voluntary slavery.<sup>60</sup>

In the opening chapters of Exodus, we find God's people in slavery. We are given no indication that they bear any blame for their condition. They have been overcome by evil, and his name is Pharaoh. God hears the cries of his people, and remembers them. He then stretches out his mighty hand to crush Pharaoh and deliver his people.

In the New Testament, we see that Jesus crushes our enemy (Col. 2:15), delivers us from slavery to sin (Rom. 6:6), and ultimately overcomes the power of the evil one (Rev. 12:9).

### *Redemption as Ransom*

Ransom is the high price God paid to purchase our freedom: his own Son on the cross. According to theologian John Murray, "The language of redemption is the language of purchase and more specifically of ransom . . . [which] presupposes some kind of bondage or captivity."<sup>61</sup> The slaves in Egypt were bound by a ruthless enemy due to no fault of their own. Yet when God came to crush Pharaoh, the slaves were equally deserving of God's judgment because of their own sin (cf. Josh. 24:14). As an act of pure grace, God provided for them a Passover lamb whose blood would stand in their place as their ransom. By this blood, and this blood alone, God spared the lives of their firstborn even as he killed the firstborn of every Egyptian household.

However, notice what *isn't* happening here. God doesn't pay the ransom price to Pharaoh, as if God owed Pharaoh anything. The ransom does not pay off the enemy; rather, it shows the great cost of redemption—a price paid by God as a gift of his grace.<sup>62</sup>

There are some who hear that God forgives sinners and yet somehow find their own sin beyond forgiveness. The debt, they think, is just too great. Many exhaust themselves attempting to pay off the debt by good behavior, religious activity, or even by wallowing in their shame as a sort of self-punishment. But this ends only in misery and greater debt. We simply cannot repay what we owe. But Jesus, the spotless Passover Lamb, has paid it all (1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:18–19).

*Redemption as Renewal*

Redemption is “in effect, the renewing of creation.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, it is *re-creation*. Terrence Fretheim, in agreement with many Exodus commentators, stresses the deep weaving of creation theology into the fabric of Exodus. He goes so far as to say, “While the liberation of Israel is the focus of God’s activity, it is not the ultimate purpose. . . . Redemption is for the purpose of creation, a new life within the larger creation, a return to the world as God intended it to be.”<sup>64</sup> So redemption restores God’s original design in creation.

Meredith Kline elaborates on the significance of redemptive recreation for the individual Christian: “Redemption is a recovering and restoring of the original. The person who experiences redemption in Christ remains the same person, even though the transformation from the sinner dead-in-sins to the saint alive-forevermore-in-Christ is so radical as to be called a new creation.”<sup>65</sup> Redemption restores you to your original purpose, to image God by your worship. God does this by remaking you in the image of Jesus, who is the perfect image of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). That means when we look at Jesus, we see a perfect picture of what God intended for humankind.

And one day, when redemption is complete, God’s original purpose for all creation will be completely restored. As in Eden, where God was present with his people, so also in the new creation “the dwelling place of God is with man”; where there was no death, “death shall be no more” (Rev. 21:3–4); where humankind ruled the earth on God’s behalf, God’s people will “reign forever and ever” (Rev. 22:5). There will be complete peace and perfect joy. Pain, shame, violence, oppression, fear, temptation, illness, famine, natural disasters—all of these pass away.

It’s hard to imagine such perfection, isn’t it? And yet when the Bible says you are a new creation, it means that you have already been made part of that whole new order of things. Jesus is the first of the new creation, and in him you too are a new creation (see 2 Cor. 5:17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:23).<sup>66</sup> In Christ, we are transformed. Idolaters, thieves, liars, sexual perverts, addicts, abusers, and victims—all of us already get new names, new identities, and new hearts with new desires (see 1 Cor. 6:9–11). Already, he is healing our wounds, covering our shame, and freeing us from the bondage to sin and temptation.



*Already-and-not-yet*

We sense, however, that we are not totally new: we still face temptation, and at times we give in; we still ache from past wounds. And there's no question that the world around us still lies in the power of the evil one. Misery—not peace—still dominates most of life on the earth. So how can we say the new has already begun, when so much corruption remains?

Theologians have spilled much ink trying to address questions raised by some biblical evidence that much of this re-creation has already begun, especially in God's people, and other biblical evidence that much is yet to come—the perfection of God's people and renewal of all creation. The view that seems to make most sense of this tension is called *inaugurated eschatology*: Jesus inaugurated his kingdom, and in him, a new creation has begun; yet the future holds the consummation of his kingdom and the perfection of all creation, including you and me. In the meantime, we live in a state of “already-and-not-yet.” We already enjoy some of the benefits of the new creation, but we do not yet know the full freedom of perfection. For that we must wait eagerly. Between now and then, there is a process of renewal.

Colossians 3:9–10 captures the already-and-not-yet experience in the life of the Christian: “You have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” The old self here has been put off (already) and the new self has been put on (already). But look what's happening with this new self: it is being renewed. Renewal is a process.<sup>67</sup>

*Worship in the Wilderness*

The wilderness is an already-and-not-yet kind of place: the Israelites were already free from slavery, but they were not yet home. As Graeme Goldsworthy says, “The exodus is the end of captivity, but it is only the beginning of freedom.”<sup>68</sup> Their deliverance freed them to worship God, but it didn't make them perfect worshipers. And though an evil oppressor no longer threatened them, they weren't free from all pain. They still carried their old wounds on their backs, and the wilderness held its own new troubles.

What we learn from the Israelites in the wilderness is that being free

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to worship God doesn't necessarily mean that we will. After all of his miraculous work to deliver them from Egypt, they doubted God's provision for them in the wilderness and grumbled bitterly for food and water. After he pursued them time and again, reiterating, "I am the God who delivers you from Egypt," they became impatient and erected a golden calf to worship, saying, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (Ex. 32:4). It could even be said that they resembled unruly young calves themselves, astray in the wilderness, rebelling against their master.<sup>69</sup>

As shocking as their idol worship was, it was the natural result of their hearts' desires. They had turned their hearts to Egypt (Acts 7:39). Though they were free to worship God, when it came right down to it, they still lived for Egypt.

And this brings us all the way back to the core of our problems and therefore to the brink of the solution. We love the wrong things, so our worship is distorted. We have exchanged the worship of God for golden calves. The solution: renewed worship.

The Puritan preacher Thomas Chalmers, in his sermon *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, said that desires for God and desires for sin cannot coexist in the human heart. They are two opposing "affections"—one will always push out the other. So, he said, "the only way to dispossess [the heart] of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one" (see Gal. 5:16–17).<sup>70</sup> You can't just "stop it," because the *it* is always more than behavior. It is always rooted in your affections, in what you love—what you worship. Chalmers points the way forward: we worshiped our way into this mess, and by God's grace, we'll worship our way out.<sup>71</sup>

Here is the moment-by-moment of our redemption: when bitterness surfaces, anxiety swells, fear stabs, or temptation lures, because we have been delivered from the bondage of sin into the freedom of the Spirit we can turn our eyes to Jesus, worship him then and there, and be changed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18).

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Emler, Michael R. *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet*. Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2009. Emler provides practical tools to help us deeply connect the meaning of the Bible to everyday life.

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- Keller, Timothy. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*. New York: Dutton, 2009. In his highly accessible and succinct style, Keller masterfully weaves biblical exposition, storytelling, observations of popular culture, and penetrating insight into human nature, to help us see idols within and all around us—and marks out the path away from them.
- Lane, Timothy S., and Paul David Tripp. *How People Change*. Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2008. This book lays a basic foundation for gospel-based life change (progressive sanctification).
- Roberts, Vaughan. *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Story-Line of the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003. Roberts concisely surveys the story of God, from Genesis to Revelation.
- Tripp, Paul David. *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002. Especially for leaders and counselors. The first five chapters lay a foundation for understanding who we are as people and what it means to live in God's story in the face of life's trials.

## SCRIPTURE READING

- Luke 24:13–35

## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- 1) Write down some of the “big details” that stand out in your life. Look for details that seem significant to you even if you don't understand their significance yet. Consider key relationships, memorable events (good or bad), illness and injuries, times where you may have been harmed, notable sins and patterns of sin, dreams and aspirations.
- 2) Are there any stories you've told to make sense of some of these details—or your whole life in general—that may need to be reconsidered in light of God's story?
- 3) Where in your life do you feel enslaved?
- 4) What do you expect to get out of this book? Or if you are going through this book with a group, what do you expect to get out of the group experience?



"A wonderful piece of gospel work. It is case-study rich, evidencing lots of wisdom in the ways of people who suffer. It is theology rich, exegeting in a very practical way the transforming power of the gospel and all the ways we are tempted to distort or minimize it. I know of no other work that does what Wilkerson has done."

**Paul Tripp**, *President, Paul Tripp Ministries; author, What Did You Expect?*

"As a pastor of a church full of younger people, I have searched for a resource that I could recommend with confidence to those stuck in their sin. This book is that resource."

**Darrin Patrick**, *Lead Pastor, The Journey, St. Louis; author, Church Planter*

**MIKE WILKERSON**, a pastor at Seattle's Mars Hill Church since 2004, is passionate about restoring gospel-based counseling to the local church and leads Mars Hill's Redemption Group ministry. He and his wife, Trisha, live in Seattle with their four young children.

"Backed by good scholarship yet accessible to all Christians, this book brims with great stories of redemption and keen insights into the souls of broken sinners, challenging readers to follow the Christ who can set people free."

**Eric Johnson**, *Lawrence and Charlotte Hoover Professor of Pastoral Care, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Director, Society for Christian Psychology*

"The combination of gripping, real-life vignettes, biblical narratives applied to sin and suffering, and the thought-provoking discussion-application guide makes *Redemption* the premier all-in-one book for small-group recovery ministry."

**Bob Kelleman**, *author, God's Healing for Life's Losses*

CHRISTIAN LIVING / RECOVERY

