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**Are God’s New Testament Promises  
Assuring Final Redemption Ultimately  
Contingent on Human Obedience?**

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**Introduction**

*Testamentum Imperium* Director Kevaughn Mattis has selected a challenging topic. Actually, he has posed a moot question: “Are God’s promises . . . dependent on human obedience?” It reminds me of similar discussions we had in seminary. Not all of our classmates were convinced that God was the sole agent in human redemption and

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human decisions had no bearing whatsoever on God's promises.<sup>2</sup> So these vivid memories come back to me. Are the five-point Calvinists on target when they maintain God's sovereignty at the expense of human responsibility? Must the answer to the above question be a negative one?

In order to answer the title's question, we shall base our "proof" on a religious document, Scripture itself, being of divine origin (2 Timothy 3:16). In keeping with the chosen topic, we shall cite more often from the New Testament (primarily from the Gospels and the epistles of the apostle Paul) than from its Old Testament or Hebrew background, using the New King James Version as our translation.

For many not schooled in the Christian faith this is a dangerous proposal. It accepts "proof" on the basis of faith or trust, not in view of human reasoning or common logic. We accept this criticism, but do not believe that either human reason or human logic can solve religious, that is, ultimate questions in its own strength.

Before proceeding to spell out our answer to the question, let us define a bit the linguistic terms found in the above question.

The first part of the question, "Are God's New Testament Promises Assuring Final Redemption . . . ?" is relatively clear. It refers to God's promises, as they are outlined in the New Testament, which assure or make certain the final redemption of believers.

The notion of believers' redemption<sup>3</sup> points to a buying back (cf. Latin re[d]-emo, "buy back") from bondage, notably, to sin. It is based on the Old Testament concept of the redemption of the Promised Land the Hebrews are to possess after being delivered from bondage in hostile Egypt (Leviticus 25:55). Moses explains specifically that a parcel of land sold in times of distress or economic poverty can be redeemed in person (vv. 10, 13, 23-26, 47) or by way of a redeemer (vv. 51-52). This happened to a piece of land owned by

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<sup>2</sup> We pondered Paul's view of divine election (Romans 9:11-15), a choosing apart from good works (v. 16), which we decided to read in the light of Romans ten, the responsibility of the believer (10:9-13) and of the preacher to preach good tidings (vv. 14-15).

We also detected that Pharaoh's heart was hardened by the Egyptian ruler himself (Exodus 7:13-14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32) before God hardened it (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; etc.). Even then Pharaoh remained stubborn (9:34-35).

<sup>3</sup> Other biblical equivalents are "salvation" (from Latin *salvus*, "safe," "unharméd"; e.g., Luke 19:9) and "eternal life" (John 3:15-16).

Elimelech of Judah which was sold during a famine but years later was redeemed by Boaz, who married Ruth, a wife of one of Elimelech's deceased sons (Ruth 4:7-9). And to another parcel, located in Anathoth, a levitical city in the southern tribe of Benjamin (1 Chronicles 6:60). It belonged to his uncle Shallum, which Jeremiah bought back as legally his during the siege of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 32:7-8). This purchase may have had a deeper meaning: Judah's retrieval from Babylonian bondage seventy years later.

Besides land, other things could be bought back, for instance, the Israelites themselves—from all their committed iniquities--by means of God's eternal covenant (Psalm 111:9) or divine mercy (Psalm 130:7; cf. vv. 3-4).

Because the Israelites did not keep God's commandments and turned from their Maker, they could not buy one another back into His favor. Not even those who "trust[ed] in their wealth" could redeem their brothers (Ps. 49:6-8), "for the redemption of their souls is costly."<sup>4</sup>

In the New Testament the word "redemption" usually contains a Greek root meaning to loosen. The prophetess Anna spoke of the Christ child to be given to all "who looked for the redemption in Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38), an allusion to God's salvation of his exilic people: he has "redeemed" Jerusalem, parallel "he has comforted" her (Isaiah 52:9).

According to the unknown author of Hebrews,<sup>5</sup> Christ, rather than former goats and calves as for Israel of old, secured "eternal redemption" for the Hebrews (Hebrews 9:12). Or the new covenant, "the promise of the eternal inheritance," redeems those called from the "transgressions under the first covenant" (v. 15), that is, from dead works to serving the living God (v. 14).

In addition, the New Testament authors spoke of a future day of redemption, beyond its present incomplete reality. Luke preserved a

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<sup>4</sup> A unique passage is Ezekiel 14:14, 20. Here it is said that should a famine or pestilence inflict the unfaithful Israelites, only three righteous people--Noah, Daniel, and Job--could "save" (NIV) themselves, none others. The text teaches that only these three can "deliver" themselves (NKJV; RSV), that is, escape from terrible disaster, not that they can redeem themselves in a religious sense.

<sup>5</sup> Various names have been suggested for the likely author of the Epistle to the Hebrews: Barnabas, Apollos, Silvanus, or Priscilla.

few of Jesus' words about the future return of the Son of man "in a cloud" (Luke 21:27). When ominous events preceding his coming are taking place, Jesus urges the inquirers to look up "because your redemption draws near" (Luke 21:28). In this passage, Jesus refers to the believers' final redemption, their lasting salvation, or eternal life.

Paul contrasts the "sufferings of this present time" (Romans 8:18) with the future "redemption of our body" (v. 23), for which he is hoping in this distressed present (vv. 24-25).

The second part of the question, ". . . ultimately contingent on human obedience?" causes one to wonder whether God's promises are intended to be conditional or dependent on human obedience. In John's gospel, believers are to keep the new commandment of love as given by Jesus to his disciples just before his death (John 13:34-35), almost immediately after he had washed their feet (vv. 1-11). This biblical passage implies, not only divine initiative but also human responsiveness to love others.

The adverb "ultimately" or "in the final analysis" contains two sticky points we hope to point out in our conclusion.

### **I. Divine Redemption**

We shall quote a few biblical passages to illustrate the foundation-al motif of the Christian faith, namely, that Jesus Christ, God's own Son, redeems sinners.<sup>6</sup>

In his encounter with a nameless Samaritan woman, Jesus ventured that had she asked for God's gift, she would have received "living water" (John 4:10). When then she asked for that priceless gift (v. 14)—water that will never make a person thirsty again—Jesus inquired about her sinful life and shifted to true worship (vv. 16-24). When she had processed Jesus' words, she believed he was the Messiah, on the basis of his knowledge of her sordid past (vv. 29, 39).

If in the above passage, Jesus refers to living water to be given away, a few chapters further in John's gospel, the Rabbi speaks about his mission to give life to his sheep, that is, to his own people (John

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<sup>6</sup> The foundation of the Christian faith comprises a fourfold theme: divine creation of the universe, including humanity, the human fall into sin, divine redemption through Jesus Christ, and a future restoration (cf. C. Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999]).

10:10). In contrast to the evil shepherds, Jesus affirms he is the good shepherd, who knows his sheep (v. 14) and gives his life on their behalf (vv. 11, 15, 17). Although it is Jesus' Father who gave him his own (v. 29), it is Jesus who gave them eternal life (v. 28), a gift that can never be taken from them (v. 28) or from which none can be separated.

Paul uses similar language. To the Roman Christians he writes that they are justified by Christ, specifically, by his atoning blood (Romans 3:24-25). The redemption of sinful humanity came in him as he reminded the Corinthian believers (1 Corinthians 1:30), the Ephesian believers (Ephesians 1:7),<sup>7</sup> and the Colossian believers (1:14).

Divine redemption is a free gift from God. It is especially Paul who restates this valuable truth a number of times--to the believers at Rome (Romans 5:15-17; cf. v. 29 "irrevocable"), at Corinth (2 Corinthians 9:15, "indescribable gift"), and at Ephesus (Ephesians 2:8; 4:7).

Having explained a number of biblical texts concerning divine sovereignty, let us now turn to the human role in redemption.

## II. Human Obedience

Matthew recorded a brief encounter between a young ruler and Rabbi Jesus. To his question what he might do to gain eternal life (Matthew 19:16), Jesus replied he should keep the Mosaic Law. When he stated he had done so many, many years, Jesus instructed him to give his wealth away to the poor and to follow him. The Rabbi's instruction rubbed the inquirer the wrong way, for he did not wish to part from his possessions (vv. 21-24).

Human responsibility clearly returns in another Matthean passage, namely, in Jesus' Olivet Discourse. Moving from the fall of Jerusalem in about forty years (Matthew 24:1-22) to the end times (vv. 23-51), Jesus zeroes in on the coming of the Son of man (25:31) who will judge mankind by separating them into two groups, as a shepherd separates his sheep and the goats (v. 32). In this remarkable passage the sheep are placed at his right hand (v. 33), to enter into the

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<sup>7</sup> The Pauline authorship of the Letter to the Ephesians can still be maintained.

kingdom prepared for them (v. 34)--on the basis of what they did with their lives (vv. 35-36):

“For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in;

I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me.”

To their astonishing reply that they did not observe any of these acts of kindness to others (vv. 37-39), the Son of man, now identified as the King (v. 40), stated that should they have done these acts of kindness to “the least of My brethren,” they would have done so “to Him” (v. 40). And so—on that basis--the “righteous [will enter] into eternal life” (v. 46).

Interestingly, Mark does not include this passage in his Gospel, ending as he does with Jesus’ urging to watch (Mark 13:37; cf. Matthew 24:42). Though Luke also omits Jesus’ three parables (Luke 21:7-38), he includes two other scenes with a similar concern for human responsibility.

As he passed through Jericho, Jesus looked up to short Zacchaeus, who had climbed unto a low-hanging branch of a Sycamore tree to have a better look at the Rabbi, and invited himself for a meal in the man’s home (Luke 19:1-5). No doubt, Jesus appreciated a free dinner, but he had a greater message for his host: he came to tell the honest and just tax collector that “today salvation has come to this house” (v. 9). The righteous life style of this individual, despised by many of his countrymen, had something to do with it.

Being crucified along with two thieves or robbers, Jesus promised the repentant robber entrance into Paradise (Luke 23:43), after the criminal had first confessed his faith in him.

The apostle Paul balances between God’s act of salvation and human response to this gift. In one of his letters, Paul urges the Philippians to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). He explains this assignment as follows: “for God who works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure” (v. 13). God works within believers, but they, in turn, are admonished to realize His presence in their lives.

In another letter, he hammers away that the Ephesians believers have been saved by grace, God’s gift, not by their own efforts

(Ephesians 2:8). He expressly adds that salvation by works is out, lest believers boast (v. 9). Qualifying this notion, he adds that they should do good works, namely, walk the life of Christian love (vv. 10-12).

Earlier in his ministry, Paul had come to reject the effort to save oneself through keeping the Mosaic Law, chiefly the ten commands or instructions. A person is justified by faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:16), not “by the works of the law” or by keeping scrupulously those commands.<sup>8</sup>

If the Galatian passage suggests that believers are passive in their salvation, Paul introduces human responsibility. He contrasts between sowing to the flesh which will reap corruption and sowing to the Spirit which will reap “everlasting life” (Galatians 6:8). In other words, what believers do with their lives has an effect on their future: If they live a life of love, they will reap such a blessed life. In fact, the apostle urges them not to become weary doing good, but, instead, to use every opportunity to be good to others (vv. 9-10).

In one of his last letters, Paul reiterates the same point. Citing the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk (Habakkuk 2:4), he opens his letter to the Roman believers affirming the just shall live by faith (Romans 1:17), for the life of faith will lead to eternal life (2:7). Over against the Jewish insistence that believers keep the Mosaic Law, Paul points out that that is an impossible burden, because one cannot keep all and everyone of the divine commandments, for instance, refusing to steal or commit adultery (2:21-23). Actually, an awareness of the Law leads to a recognition of sin (3:20b).

If human righteousness achieved on the basis of works is out of the question, the remedy consists in the gift of redemption through Christ (v. 24), to be accepted in faith (v. 28), as did Abraham (4:3).

Underscoring that the Roman Christians not yield to the temptation to commit sin (Romans 6:13), as the Christian walk is one of holiness, Paul explains in the ethical section of his letter that they

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<sup>8</sup> Years ago, John Hesselink called my attention to the so-called third use of the Mosaic Law. Believers keep the Decalogue out of gratitude for God’s redemption, not because they wish to earn their salvation or redemption.

When the apostle Paul was about to be lifted from this earthly life, he wrote to his pastor friend Timothy that he had “fought the good fight, [had] finished the race, [and had] kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4: 7). He did not communicate that he had kept the Mosaic Law.

are to present themselves in a holy and acceptable manner to God and to be transformed into personal renewal (12: 1-2).

To give two more examples, the unknown author of Hebrews encouraged the disillusioned Hebrews with presenting a great cloud of witnesses surrounding their faith (Hebrews 12:1-2), so that they, in turn, would lay aside obstacles and excuses and run the race of faith (12:1b).

To the patient and suffering church at Ephesus, John writes that he who overcomes or conquers, God will grant to “eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). The same exhortation is given to the faithful church at Pergamum (v. 17).

### **Conclusion**

If we affirm that redemption is possible only as a divine gift without any human responsibility, then we are bound to sail into the harbor of divine determinism. Then humans become mere puppets maneuverable by God the Puppeteer. The New Testament writers do not sail in that direction, however. They do not let up on human obedience, as we saw. Further, they do not disclose to their readers who personally will be saved, even if God desires all to come to saving knowledge (1 Timothy 2:4).

If, on the other hand, we focus on human obedience alone, then we run the risk to become humanists, creatures capable of saving ourselves. Then, in fact, we suggest to ourselves we can overcome sin by pulling ourselves up on our own bootstraps. But that option the apostle Paul easily unnerves: if we follow one commandment of the Decalogue, we may fail in another, that is, if we do not kill, we may be tempted to steal, as we noted. And John, possibly the disciple Jesus loved, concurs: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful to forgive our sins” (1 John 1:8-9). He puts it even sharper: “If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar” (v. 10).

A biblical example may clarify this divine-human drama. A comparison may be drawn between God’s choosing of Israel and His choosing of human beings. The covenant God YHWH chose the Israelite slaves to be redeemed from their Egyptian bondage



(Deuteronomy 7:6), not because they were more numerous than other nations but because He loved them (vv. 7-8).<sup>9</sup>

God would remain their faithful ruler should they obey His commandments (vv. 9, 12-13). He not only promised that, but also enacted His promise. He aided His people during their forty-year trek through the desert (Deuteronomy 2:7; 8:2-4), and in carving a place for themselves in their new homeland, Canaan (Joshua 5:1—11:23).

Soon, actually already shortly after God initiated His covenant—the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32:1-8)—it became obvious that the Hebrews went counter to God’s Decalogue and broke their end of the bargain, so to speak. Consequently, during the reign of the judges, God sent them plagues and enemies to correct their walk of life. When they repented of their sin (e.g., Judges 3:9, 15), they experienced again God’s favor.

After a three-hundred year cycle of apostasy, punishment, and redemption (Judges 2:11-20), the Israelites chose to elect a king (1 Samuel 8:5-20). Their heart was not really with their God, whom they had rejected. Eventually--after many, many warnings—God sent them into exile: the ten northern tribes to Assyria territories (2 Kings 18:9-12), the two southern tribes to Babylonia (2 Kings 25:1-8).

Even though human rebellion caused God to remove His own from their given land—the north (2 Kings 17:7-12) as well as the south (2 Kings 21:11-16)--that was not the end of God’s love for them. He enabled some of the southern exiles to return to their own home (ca. 532 BC) by means of the beneficent rule of King Cyrus (Ezra 1:1—2:67). If God, indeed, does hate divorce, He may have tried and tested His people in Babylon, but He would not abandon them there.

During those dreary seventy years (cf. Jeremiah 25:12; Daniel 9:2), the prophet Isaiah reminded the exiles they had been redeemed by God (43:1; 63:9), that is, their transgressions have been blotted out (44:22), and as a result they are to flee Babylon (48:20).

Several centuries later, the Jewish leaders persuaded the Roman governor Pontius Pilate to crucify the Son of God, but that cruel act

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<sup>9</sup> According to Hosea (11:8-9; cf. 13:14), God has a deep love for sinful Israel. Pleading with his unfaithful people, God shares with them that His heart is churning within Him, that He cannot really give them up.

did not prevent God from embracing once again His people. Paul’s last word about his kinsmen was that, following the fulfilled time of the Gentiles, “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26-27), citing the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 27:9).

Clearly, God works His redemption plan through His people—not apart from their actions—to accomplish His purposes, also His goal to save or redeem.

An historical example may buttress our exposition. In his *The City of God* (bk. 5, ch. 9),<sup>10</sup> the aged Augustine stated this complex issue succinctly:

On the one hand,

. . . if a certain order of things [is foreknown], then a certain order of causes . . .  
But if there is a certain order of causes according to which everything happens which does happen, then by fate . . . all things happen which do happen. But if this be so, then there is nothing in our power . . . and if we grant that . . . the whole economy of human life is subverted.

On the other hand,

If there is free will, all things do not happen according to fate; if all things do not happen according to fate, there is not a certain order of causes; and if there is no certain order of causes, neither is there a certain order of things foreknown by God . . . if there is no . . . certain order of causes foreknown by God, all things cannot be said to happen according as He foreknew . . . .

In other words, should mankind assume to be autonomous, then God would not foreknow future events; should mankind not be free but be determined by God, then human accountability would be in vain. In his own proposed version, the African theologian accepted both God’s omnipotence (redefined as foreknowledge) and human free will (as included in God’s foreknowledge).

This biblical vision of a “partnership” between God and humanity avoids the alluring temptation to emphasize either of two extremes, either divine determinism—a danger for five-point Calvinists—or the possibility of human sinlessness in this life—a pitfall for Arminians. That is, it affirms both God and humans are involved in human redemption.

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<sup>10</sup> In his anti-Pelagian writings, Augustine swings to the divine side of the divine-human polarity.

Our proposed both-and position, as I see it, contains two sticky questions. (1) if we embrace wholeheartedly the certainty of our redemption, confidently broadcasting that none shall “snatch” us out of Jesus’ hand” (John 10:28b), we may be tempted to think we are invincible, immune to any deflection from God’s plan of redemption, to the effect that not even actual sins can remove us from Christ’s protection. While God sustains the weak believer in times of doubt and despondency (cf. Hebrews 12:1-2), we should not assume that “once we are saved,” we will always automatically remain saved. For confident Peter, one of Jesus intimate disciples, thought it impossible that he would deny his Master thrice (John 18:17, 25-27). But he did anyway and regretted it afterward.

On the flip side, covenant children in Christian homes may take their secure and serene setting for granted and never appropriate or internalize their redemption. They may avoid responding to God’s calling them to confess Him and may merrily go their own way. This neglect has been identified as a “great misunderstanding” of the interpretation of redemption.<sup>11</sup>

(2) If we focus on human responsibility alone, we may wonder whether believers can always stay close to God’s love and to God the Lover. The German Reformer wrestled with that agonizing issue. In his debate with the humanist Erasmus (1525), Luther confessed<sup>12</sup>:

As for myself, I frankly confess, that I should not want free will to be given me, even if it could be, nor anything else be left in my own hands to enable me to strive after my salvation. And that, not merely, because in the face of so many dangers, adversities and onslaughts of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my free will . . . but because, even though there were no dangers, adversities or devils, I should still be forced to labor with no guarantee of success and to beat the air only. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God.

To continue this line of argumentation, in their ethical strivings believers may even fall from grace and lose God’s unmerited favor. The New Testament cites a few examples of believers who actually

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. the Reformed theologian G. C. Berkouwer, in his *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), ch. 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1961), pp. 135-36.

fell from grace. Demas was one of Paul's fellow laborers (Philemon 24), even a believer during Paul's first imprisonment (Colossians 4:14), before he forsook the faith during the apostle's second imprisonment (2 Timothy 4:10). Hymenaeus destroyed his own faith; as a result, Paul "delivered" him to Satan (1 Timothy 1:19-20), because he denied the resurrection (2 Timothy 2:17-18).

Earlier, during his second missionary journey, Paul had to face the same disruptive occurrence among the Galatian believers. He felt compelled to accuse them of having "fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4; cf. 3:1-5). In another context, he warned the Corinthian believers that that possibility might happen to them as well (1 Corinthians 10:12; cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:3).

None summarizes the biblical vision of the joint authorship of human redemption as beautifully and clearly as did Corrie ten Boom, a survivor of one of the Nazi concentration camps, in the following eight-line poem:

My life is but a weaving between my God and me,  
I do not choose the colors, He works so steadily.  
Oft'times He weaves in sorrow, and I in foolish pride,  
Forget He sees the upper, and I the underside.

Not till the loom is silent, and the shuttles cease to fly  
Will God unroll the canvas, and explain the reason why.  
The dark threads are as needful in the Weaver's skillful hand  
As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.

And so our quest has come to a rewarding end, at last. Yes, God's promises invite, even strongly encourage human obedience!



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