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

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Introduction

The word redemption is defined as: the act of saving something or somebody from a declined, dilapidated, or corrupted state and restoring it, him, or her to a better condition; or the buying back of something given, as a security for a loan, for example to a pawnbroker; or to obtain the release or restoration of, as from captivity or bondage, by paying a price or ransom to deliver or rescue (Encarta /New Webster Dictionaries). Redemption then involves the act of purchasing back something or a person which or who was in no position to effect the redemption by itself or him/herself. The state of the redeemed person or thing becomes improved since it/he is rescued

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from an apparent irreversible decline. He/she/it now becomes acceptable and pleasant in spite of its negative qualities or aspect.

In the Christian sense, although, the word redemption still expresses the idea of release and restoration to a better state, it is used within the context of the death of Jesus Christ. Thus redemption deals with the work of Jesus on the cross in which he paid the price to “purchase” human beings and set them free from the destructive effects of sin.

Redemption in the New Testament

The concept of redemption in the New Testament has its roots in the Old Testament. The need for redemption started when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:6). Humankind and creation were cursed for this disobedience. The curse and the subsequent effects of the disobedience, needed to be removed in order to reconcile humankind and creation back to God. Disobedience and sin are therefore the root causes for the redemption of humankind and creation.

Throughout the Old Testament history, God, through series of leaders, prophets, events, and messages sought to reconcile humankind to himself and free it from the effects of the disobedience. The divine act of deliverance from Egypt, narrated in the Exodus story, was one such redemptive act. It became the basis on which appeal was made to the Lord to redeem as well as the ‘type’, for understanding God’s future acts of redemption for his people (Isa. 43:14-16; 48:20, 63:16; Jer.31:11) (Douglas (ed.), 1987, p.850).

The starting point for the use of the concept of redemption in the New Testament, however, is found in the sayings of Jesus, which state that no one can give anything in exchange for his life (Mk. 8:37) but that the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many (Marshall, 1990). Jesus, by giving his own life in exchange for those whose lives are forfeit, sets them free, and does what God alone can do (Ps. 49:15). Thus, it is the death of Jesus as sacrifice (Acts 20:28; Rom.3:24; 1Pet. 1:18) that redeems individuals, and sets them free from sin and its consequence (Col. 1:14; Eph. 1:7). The climax to this redemptive act would be ushered in with the second coming of Christ.

This paper examines final redemption from the Pauline point of view. It examines two passages in Romans with the aim of

determining the role of human obedience, if any, in the ushering in of final redemption.

Final Redemption in the Epistle to the Romans

Paul describes a final redemption scene in Rom.8: 18-27. In this passage, three issues come out with respect to final redemption. 1) The glory that awaits believers and would be revealed at the final redemption makes the present sufferings fade into insignificance. The Apostle is here appealing to believers to be patient, endure the present suffering and wait for the final redemption. 2) It is those who have the first fruits of the Spirit or have received the Spirit of sonship that would be glorified. 3) Creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8: 20).

From the passage, God's assurance of final redemption is a reality for: 1) those described as, having "the first fruits of the Spirit" or have received the Spirit of sonship, and 2) Creation. To whom or what do these refer?

1.Those described as having "the first fruits of the Spirit" are individuals who have been set free from sin and slavery, become justified (Gal. 3:8, 11), received the gift of the Spirit (Gal. 4:6), and become the free sons of God (Gal. 4:5-7) (Marshall, 1990, p. 241). The receipt of the Spirit seals these individuals as possessions of God.

This is the idea conveyed in Rom. 8:15, 16 and Gal. 4:6. In these passages Paul expresses the idea that believers are constituted sons through the gift of the Spirit and the proof that we are sons in the Spirit is our ability to address God as "Abba Father". Paul thought that the gift of the Spirit "is that which brings the individual into the covenant of promise, that which begins his Christian life" (Dunn, 1970, p.113). It is the Spirit who creates sonship. When we receive the Holy Spirit, he develops a relationship of sonship between us and God. "All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom. 8:15).

Being the son of God was a unique right of Jesus. According to the Gospel writers, Jesus knew himself to be the Son. Examples cited are the narratives of Jesus' experience at Jordan (Mk. 1: 9-11) in which some see an allusions to Ps. 2:7 ; the Q account of Jesus' temptation in which the test focused on Jesus' conviction of sonship (Matt. 4: 1-11, Luke 4: 1 -13). In addition is the Lucan account of

Jesus' boyhood visit to the temple and the transfiguration story. His use of "abba" in address or prayer to God, a word which has a connotation of familiarity, is an indication of this sense of sonship. This is the unique relationship which the Spirit enables us to share. It is not the individual's good works that makes one a son of God and it is not physical descent that entitles the individual to this position. It is the act of God through the Holy Spirit. Those who by this act are adopted as sons are the ones described in Rom. 8:23 as having the first fruits of the Spirit and are assured of and can look forward to final redemption.

Paul describes this group again in Rom.8:23 as groaning "inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons" and in Rom. 8:26 as "in the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for but the spirit himself intercedes for us with groans..." What do these descriptions tell us about this group which is assured of final redemption? These can be deduced from a. the cause of the groaning and b. the meaning and cause of the 'weakness' that has afflicted the sons of God.

- a. The cause of the groaning is indicated in Rom. 8:20-23, where Paul speaks of the whole of creation and "we ourselves" groaning for the revelation of the sons of God. In v.22, creation groans because it has been subjected to *mataiotes*. It waits anxiously and expectantly for the revelation of the sons of God. We also groan because we want to be rid of this *mataiotes*. The revelation of the sons of God would bring an end to our subjection to *mataiotes*. In effect the cause of the groaning is the subjection of creation and "we ourselves" to *mataiotes*.
- b. The group is also affected by what is described as *asthenia* translated in English as 'weakness'. There are two possible interpretations to the word *asthenia* depending on the reading that is adopted. If the Byzantine plural *tais astheniais*, (our weakness) is read, the reference is to general moral weakness. The 'weakness' is the total human powerlessness in the world. The manuscript support for this is, however, weak. The Alexandrian reading, *te asthenia*, refers to a specific infirmity-inability to pray. Black writes: are we to interpret weakness

here of human frailty in general or in the light of 26b, of the imperfection of devotional life (Black, 1973, p.123). The view that “weakness” refers to general weakness is held by scholars like Dodd (1932, p.135), and Murray (1974, p.311). Their view is that this “weakness” is that which comes to us so long as we are in this flesh and remain finite creatures in a finite world; our weakness is our humanity. The second view equates “weakness” to the fact we do not know how to pray. This has the support of scholars like Sanday and Headlam (1902, p.213) and Conner (1949, p.107)

Although the context seems to suggest the second view, since the assertion that “we do not know how to pray as we ought” follows immediately after “weakness”, and appears to be qualifying it, this paper holds the view that there is more to *asthenia* than just inability to pray. Earlier Paul had spoken of the whole of creation and ‘we ourselves’, groaning for the revelation of the sons of God because of subjection to *mataiotes*. The subjection to *mataiotes* has affected all aspects of our lives including prayer. So *asthenia* results from the subjection to *mataiotes*.

How do we understand *mataiotes* in the passage? Three things should be noted about *mataiotes*: first it is a state or condition that characterizes creation as we know it; second the act of subjection was begun and completed in the past, (as is indicated by the aorist tense *hupetage*), but its effects continue and; third the phrase ‘in hope’ indicates that the state is only provisional and will come to an end.

Mataiotes is possible of three meanings in the LXX and the NT. i) It is applied to wrong or consciously false statements; ii) it is applied as a description to wasted endeavors; a designation of transitoriness of beauty, of youth and the life of man and as a designation for lack of order, reason and righteousness in human life; iii) it is applied to idols; the making of idols and of their worship. Thus *mataiotes* represents to the people concerned, **a lack of** morality, truth, success, decency, meaningfulness, fullness of power, religious knowledge etc. What is specifically lacking, however, is determined from the context of the passage. Various explanations have been given to *mataiotes* in Rom. 8:20 (See Cranfield, 1975, p. 413)

I have argued elsewhere, (Obeng, 1980, p. 212) that the use of *mataiotes* in Rom. 8: 20, has a reference to idol worship, but stressed that the important point is not the act of idolatry but the consequence of it. The consequence of idol worship is futility on the part of those who engage in it and frustration of the sub human creation for not being able to fulfil the purpose of its existence. Because human kind places its faith in idols, its actions is characterized by emptiness; everything in our experience of life in this world is empty of meaning or worth. The cause of the groaning and weakness is this emptiness or futility which characterizes human existence; it clouds our thinking, our sense of direction and blinds us to the true goals of life. In fact all our efforts to achieve something on our own are ultimately futile. This futility affects our prayer life too. As long as humankind remains in this condition, there will be no effective purpose to our actions. It was God who subjected humankind to *mataiotes*. This subjection, as already indicated, was done in hope; this means that someday, in God's own time this provisional state will be changed. It is only God who can change this state and release humankind from the encirclement of frustration and futility. To ease the frustrations and futility, however, the Spirit is sent by God to help believers, and to give direction to their lives.

In view of this subjection to *mataiotes*, humanity is ignorant of God's will. This ignorance of God's will is not due to lack of faith or lack of exposition of the word of God. It simply results from our subjection to *mataiotes*. Every aspect of our lives is affected by this emptiness and ineffectiveness. In view of this, God's promise of final redemption cannot depend on human obedience since, that itself is subjected to *mataiotes*.

2) Final Redemption would also involve creation (*ktisis*). Paul states in Rom. 8: 19-20 that "creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it...creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." Paul's statement here is that creation is held in bondage to sin, decay, powerlessness, lack of beauty, and all that characterizes the present condition of humanity. The freedom of creation from this bondage will occur in and with the glorification of the children of God. John

Murray (1974, pp.301-302) identifies creation with the creative act in Rom. 1:20 but delineates it to refer to “non rational creation, animate and inanimate.” Brendan Bryne has also carefully analyzed the meaning of the word creation as Paul uses it here and establishes that “it refers to the entire non human world which the biblical creation stories present as the essential context for human life” (Cited by Edwards). I have also argued elsewhere, that creation refers to sub human creation (Obeng, 1980, p.210) and I wish to maintain the same position here. Thus Paul sees creation and humanity as sharing a common fate in God’s final redemption and transformation of all things in Christ. It is worthy of note that in this restoration of creation, the key and main agent is God. The process of restoration does not depend on humanity. Paul does not make any reference to human role or responsibility in the process. So far as the analysis of this passage is concerned final redemption cannot be dependent on human obedience.

A final redemptive act of God is again described in Rom. 8: 29-30. In this passage, Paul talks about the climax of final redemption - the glorification of the believer. He describes those to be glorified as the ones whom God has predestined, called, and justified.

They are **predestined** because God has decreed or foreordained their circumstances and destiny, according to his perfect will. In his omniscience, God has foreseen how these individuals would respond to the offer of the gospel and has predestined to eternal life those whom he has foreseen responding in faith and obedience. In this interpretation, predestination is conditioned on God’s prevision of faith. However, Murray writes “it is certainly true that God foresees faith; he foresees all that comes to pass. The question would then simply be: whence proceeds this faith which God foresees? And the only biblical answer is that the faith which God foresees is the faith he himself creates (John 3:3-6; 6:44, 45, 65; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29). Hence his eternal foresight of faith is preconditioned by his decree to generate this faith in those whom he foresees as believing... ”. Murray here underscores the biblical doctrine of the sovereign election of God (Murray, 1974, p.318). God chooses whom he wills for his salvation.

They are **called** through the “act of God’s grace and power by which he sovereignly unites us to Christ (1 Cor. 1:9). God the father is

the specific agent, (Rom.8:28-30; Gal. 1:15), not only inviting but powerfully and graciously introducing us into his kingdom according to his eternal purpose in Christ, which can never be undone” (Ferguson (ed.), 1989). Those are called through an act of grace.

They are **justified** because of the “judicial act of God by which, on the basis of the meritorious work of Christ, imputed to the sinner and received through faith, God declares the sinner absolved from sin, released from its penalty, and restored as righteous”. Justification, simply expressed means being placed by God in a right relationship with himself (Douglas (ed.), 1987, p.559). God is the main agent in the justification process and it does not come about because of anything believers have done. The relationship is established by the power and mercy of God alone.

The three elements of predestination, calling and justification are thus stages in a continuum which end in glorification. Glorification is the final goal of redemption. It is “the final phase of the application of redemption. It is that which brings to completion the process which begins in effectual calling. Indeed it is the completion of the whole process of redemption. For glorification means the attainment of the goal to which the elect of God were predestined in the eternal purpose of the Father and it involves the consummation of the redemption secured and procured by the vicarious work of Christ” (Murray, 1955).

Predestination, calling, justification and glorification are acts of God. It would be wrong to think of any of these elements of the application of redemption, in any other terms than those of *divine action* (Murray, 1974, p.320). Although all four affect humankind and draw it into their scope, it is God alone who is active in these events. There is no mention of any activity on the part of humans that supply “any ingredient of their definition or contributes to their efficacy” (Murray, 1974, p.321). God directs and dictates the process.

Conclusion

In these two passages examined, final redemption in Pauline thought, does not depend on human obedience for its fulfilment. God in his infinite wisdom and grace will glorify his select people.

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