



ATONEMENT V:

Ransom

ONE OF THE MOST explicit biblical views on the “at-one-ment” of God with mankind is the concept of “ransom”:

... even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom [Gr. *lutron* = price] for many. — Matthew 20:28; see also Mark 10:45.

For ye are bought with a price [Gr. *time* = honor, preciousness, price]: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s. — 1 Corinthians 6:20; see also 1 Corinthians 7:23.

For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom [Gr. *antilutron* = corresponding price] for all, to be testified in due time. — 1 Timothy 2:5, 6.

“Looked at in this light, the Atonement appears as the deliverance from captivity by the payment of a ransom. This view is already developed . . . [by St. Irenaeus (ca 115-200) in *Aversus Haereses V, I* and later by St. Augustine (354-430) in *Enarratio in Psalm xcv.n.5*].”¹ Unfortunately, the figure of atonement by ransom was carried too far. “When a captive is ransomed the price is naturally paid to the conqueror by whom he is held in bondage. Hence, if this figure were taken literally . . . , it would seem that the price of man’s ransom must be paid to Satan. The notion is certainly startling, if not revolting. . . . [Nevertheless,] this curious notion, apparently first mooted by St. Irenaeus, . . . played a conspicuous part in the history of theology . . . for about a thousand years. In the hands of some of the later Fathers and medieval writers, it takes various forms, and some of its more repulsive features are softened or modified. But the strange notion of some right or claim on the part of Satan is still present. . . . [I]t was not till St. Anselm [1033-1109] and Abelard [1079-1142] had met it with unanswerable arguments that its power was finally broken.”²

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Thus, while the Bible explicitly uses the term “ransom” to define the atonement, and likewise asserts that Jesus Christ paid the “price” for our redemption, these metaphoric words must not be construed to mean that God acquiesced to some right or claim on the part of Satan. The intended meaning(s) of these words must yet be explored. Meanwhile, let us rejoice that —

Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain;
He washed it white as snow.³

Endnotes

1. W. H. Kent, Catholic Encyclopedia, s.v. “Doctrine of the Atonement,” at www.newadvent.org/cathen/02055a.htm.
2. Ibid.
3. Elvina M. Hall, “Jesus Paid It All” (1865), at www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/j/p/jpaidall.htm.

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