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The Provision of a Redeemer

When hiking along the Appalachian Trail in the Southeastern United States, one's heavy slogging is rewarded with occasional glimpses of great beauty. Then, in certain locations, the trail rises to follow the ridge. Here the hiker is given an uninterrupted and intoxicating view of remarkable beauty in every direction.

We have been slogging through some pretty heavy truths. While the sorrow and guilt and brokenness of humanity is important to be known, it presents an image of helplessness and lostness that can and often does lead to despair. Fortunately, the trail does not terminate there. In this chapter we ascend to a ridge from which we see Jesus. It is Jesus who will occupy our attention in this chapter.

To many, Jesus is merely the founder of a religion. There is some truth to that, of course. But as the Catechism here shows, He is far more than that. He is the Son of God and the redeemer of a fallen people. For that fallen people He is a gift of great beauty to be relished for eternity. We get to walk along this ridge for a while and capture a glimpse of that beauty.

15 GOD'S RESCUE

Q. 20. Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

A. God having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a redeemer.



Had the question asked here, ‘Did God leave all mankind to perish...’ been answered with a simple ‘yes,’ the Catechism would never have needed to have been written. This infinite, eternal, and unchangeable God could have chosen to leave His creation to His creature’s covenantal choice and abandoned the project as a lost cause. All mankind would have perished justly in the estate of sin and misery, and God would be no less righteous or noble for it. If He were then to be known at all, He would be known as one perfectly and fully just in all His ways. There could be none to bring any charge against Him. Humanity had made its choice.

But that is not what God chose to do. That He made a choice, that He chose to act in a way that would rescue people, that is, bring them ‘into an estate of salvation,’ is the primary act by which God should be understood. The fully just God, the one of absolute and perfect holiness, this God chose to act with mercy, to bring His people to a place that their actions did not deserve. He chose to rescue rebels out of the consequences of their rebellion into the place of His

favor, and He chose to do so in spite of their determination to reject Him. In mercy He determined to retrieve them from their foolishness and to give them what they sought but could never find apart from His intervention.

I'm dancing around some words here that either mystify because of unfamiliarity or obscure the truth because of over familiarity. Words like 'covenant' (which we've already discussed), 'everlasting life,' 'elected,' 'salvation,' and 'redeemer' are wonderful words which we may or may not understand rightly. Some of them confuse us, and each could justify a lengthy consideration.

Perhaps the most puzzling and troubling word, the word most liable to upset our thinking about God is the simple word 'some.' The covenant with Adam was made on behalf of *all* humanity and so *all* fell when Adam fell. But God here enters into a covenant that is limited. He resolves to elect *some* but not all. To elect *some* to life is to abandon others to its opposite. This is unsettling. Yes, those whom God passes by are those who in Adam have already chosen their fate, but so had the some who are rescued.

This is unsettling largely because we cannot see with the eyes of God or know all that He intends. We are never meant to try to uncover God's ways. What we are meant to do is to ponder in amazement that, totally apart from our deserving, we are among that some.¹

1 I understand that this insufficiently treats a subject that is a stumbling block to many. We are taught election in the Bible, it seems to me, so that we might know the depth of God's love for us, the reach of His compassion, and to be assured that those whom God chooses He cannot lose. Others, the identity of whom we are incapable of defining, we must leave to His wisdom and mercy.

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What must not be obscured or lost is the central theme that God did not leave His people to die. A vast number, a 'some' that numbers more than the stars in the sky or sand on the seashore,² He did not leave to the consequences of their sin. He did not leave them to eternal misery but chose, rather, to deliver them, to rescue and to redeem them.

And why? Because of His mere good pleasure. Because it pleased Him to do so. It made Him happy to pursue us. It was His delight to rescue you.

And that is the most stunning reality of all.

16 JESUS – HIS NATURE

Q. 21. Who is the redeemer of God's elect?

A. The only redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.



There is a scene in the classic 1959 movie *Ben Hur* in which the enslaved hero of the movie, Judah Ben Hur, is driven parched and bitter with other slaves across the desert and past a figure we later learn to be Jesus of Nazareth. The face

2 Compare the promise to Abraham: 'I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore' (Gen. 22:17) with its fulfillment in heaven: 'I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb' (Rev. 7:9).

of Jesus is never exposed to the camera. We see, however, a figure with unruffled, slightly wavy brown hair touching the collar of his robe moving slowly and gracefully to the side of Judah Ben Hur to offer him water.

The compassion of this scene is genuine. The physical image problematic. When Jesus' character is packaged in such a weak, otherworldly, nearly bodiless persona it becomes hard for modern people to see Jesus as the fully rounded person He was and as He is represented to us in the Bible.³ The 'redeemer of God's elect,' as the Catechism has introduced Him, is a far more complex and unique character than our artists can convey.

Since God deals with His people covenantally, the redeemer who would be the head of a new covenant to rescue fallen humanity had to be human. Scripture presents Jesus as the fully human, adopted son of a carpenter named Joseph, miraculously conceived in the virgin womb of His mother, and Joseph's wife, Mary. He was born in the small town of Bethlehem, a descendant of Israel's great king David, and raised in the Galilean town of Nazareth. We can infer that as a child, being human, He got colds, skinned His knees, grew tired, and, contrary to the Christmas song,⁴ cried when in need. He was a human child who grew up to be a human man. He was completely and fully human.

In His thirtieth year He gathered disciples and began to travel, to teach, and to do remarkable things, miraculous

3 Particularly in the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

4 The carol 'Away in a Manger' has a line '... the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes,' which reflects the tendency we have to isolate Jesus from His full and complete humanity.

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things, which left ordinary people amazed and the authorities perplexed. His actions seemed to claim rights that belonged only to God. He forgave sin, He commanded storms, and He allowed men to bow before Him in worship. Some judged such things to be blasphemous because by them Jesus was acting like God.

His followers, however, slowly put the pieces together. Speaking for them all Peter declared that Jesus was the Son of God,⁵ a radical confession which a later follower, Paul, explained as meaning that in Jesus ‘...the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.’⁶ This Jesus, completely and fully human, was also completely and fully God.

Being both God and man, Jesus possessed both a human and a divine nature. And yet He is one person. He is not divided or confused. He is not a ‘Jesus Blend’ like one might find among coffee beans. He does not possess two separate consciousnesses. There is never any internal argument raging in Him between His god nature and His human nature. When He prays, He is not talking to Himself. He is a singular person with two natures. We bow before this as a mystery, as something that we cannot fully comprehend but which is true.

We struggle to put it together, and yet the people who saw Him and lived with Him and heard Him did not respond to Him as a theological curiosity to be examined, dissected, and debated. He moved them by His teaching as no other, and in His eyes and actions they saw boundless compassion, courage, and wisdom. They saw Him as a person they wanted to follow, as should we.

5 ‘You are the Christ, the son of the living God’ (Matt. 16:16).

6 Colossians 2:9.

After Jesus' death, two of His disciples, walking away from Jerusalem, were deep in conversation when a stranger (or so He first appeared) asked what they were talking about. In response, we read: 'And they stood still, looking sad.'⁷ They were not sad because a theological oddity had been taken from them. They were sad because they had lost a friend who had loved them.

This is the redeemer of God's elect.

17 JESUS – HIS PERFECTION

Q. 22. How did Christ, being the Son of God, become man?

A. Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin.

Q. 23. What offices does Christ execute as our redeemer?

A. Christ, as our redeemer, executes the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation.



If you were to sit a fifteen-year-old Jesus down for a game of chess, would you have a chance of winning? Or, if basketball

7 Luke 24:17. The 'stranger' was Jesus whom they were at that point unable to recognize.

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had been invented, would Jesus have ever missed a free throw? Would He have been able to draw like da Vinci and conceive of the universe like Einstein?

On the one hand those questions seem ludicrous. And yet answering them forces us to view the common idea of Jesus' perfection with some perspective. He was a man, and as a man He possessed a true and real body and a soul which reasoned and functioned humanly. His true body was not therefore athletically perfect. His reasonable soul would not necessarily see any more moves ahead on the chess board than you or I could. There is no reason to think that He knew more about relativity than I (which isn't saying much) and were He to have painted what He saw at the last supper, it may not have had the lasting power of da Vinci's later vision.

Jesus' perfection lay not in His abilities, which are the product of nature and nurture. His perfection lay rather in His sinlessness, an attribute unknown among other men. He was conceived without the stain of original sin. Throughout His life He was tempted in all those ways that people are tempted to sin. But these He consistently resisted.⁸ He would not move a piece when His opponent was not looking. He would not claim to have built a table that in fact was the work of His father. He would have admitted that He fouled the shooter.

I don't think we need to assume therefore that He imagined killing Herod or fantasized about what He and Mary Magdalene might do after midnight. And yet in some manner He was tempted to sin, to set Himself above His Father and to stand against His Father's law, and in every case He chose faithful obedience to the Father.

8 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin' (Heb. 4:15).

Among the reasons why this is important is that His faithful obedience allowed Him to fulfill the roles which provided for our rescue. In Israel there were three offices—all of which bridged the space between God and His people—the prophet, the priest, and the king. In the past, these offices could only be filled by imperfect and sinful people. Jesus was sent and was able to fill them perfectly and sinlessly. By His faithful execution of these roles, He secured our rescue, our redemption.

For this He had no need for a perfect jump shot.

18 JESUS THE PROPHET

Q. 24. How does Christ execute the office of a prophet?

A. Christ executes the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.



In popular vernacular a prophet is someone who has an uncanny ability to tell the future. In the Bible a prophet is one who has the divinely given ability to tell the truth. Sometimes this involved the future, of course. But truth was the prophet's focus, and the truth of the prophet in Israel was the truth given to him by God. The prophet spoke the truth of God to God's people. When Moses, a prophet of God, was nearing death, he spoke of another prophet whom

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God would raise up,⁹ one who like him would be close to God and as a prophet speak the truth of God. It is into this role, this office, that Jesus was placed. He was the prophet for whom Israel looked.

So fully did Jesus inhabit this office that the Apostle John tells us that He not only spoke the Word of God but that He *was* the Word. He tells us that when Jesus came, 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'¹⁰

He fulfilled this office well. Some of His teaching was captured by the apostles and written down in the Gospels.¹¹ Those who heard Jesus speak noted the inherent authority in His words. He was not like other teachers, who linked the authority of their words to the authority of others who had come before them. Jesus spoke the truth of God and the authority of His words needed no further attestation.

Some Bibles are fond of printing what they call the 'words of Jesus' in red print. This recognizes the prophetic authority of Jesus' words which is good, but it is incomplete and potentially misleading. Jesus is the prophet behind all that is written in the New Testament. After Jesus' death He gave to the Church His Holy Spirit to continue to shape the words that were spoken and preserved concerning Him.¹² Luke, who wrote the gospel that bears his name

9 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen' (Deut. 18:15).

10 John 1:14.

11 John also tells us: 'Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (John 21:25).

12 Of the Holy Spirit more will be said later.

as well as the Book of Acts, characterized the first book as the one where he recorded what ‘Jesus began to do and teach.’¹³ The Book of Acts contains what Jesus continued to do and teach through the apostles whom He called. A case could be made that if we highlighted the words of Jesus, then the entire New Testament (indeed, the whole Bible) would be red.¹⁴

The existence of a prophet’s words, however, is not as remarkable as the content of those words. This prophet, Jesus, has come with a word from God to a lost people to show them the way home. He has come to reveal to those with ears to hear God’s desire for their salvation. And the words He spoke, and the life He lived, showed that the will of God for the salvation of His people was not what they must do to find their way home, but what He was doing and now has done to bring them home. This is a much more gracious word than any could hope to hear.

A person lost in the desert will not draw much benefit from her fortune being told. On the other hand, if someone came and told her the true path to true water, that one would be celebrated.

Jesus is such a person, the prophet about whom God said: ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him.’¹⁵

13 Acts 1:1.

14 The New Testament is that portion of the Bible beginning with the book of Matthew and ending with the Book of Revelation.

15 Mark 9:7.