

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Redemption

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Scripture:

Revelation 21

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

⁶ He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. ⁸ But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

The New Jerusalem, the Bride of the Lamb

⁹ One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. ¹¹ It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹² It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. ¹³ There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and

three on the west. ¹⁴ The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

¹⁵ The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. ¹⁶ The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. ¹⁷ The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits thick. ¹⁸ The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. ¹⁹ The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, ²⁰ the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. ²¹ The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.

²² I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶ The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷ Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Transcript:

Thank you for being here. Today we're kicking off a new sermon series called The Narrative about the different narratives, the primal beliefs we all have in our heads that guide our decisions, our actions, our feelings. For instance, just this week I read an article that was encouraging parents not to give their kids a narrative that the world is a dangerous place. It cited all these different studies that people who view the world as a dangerous place, people who have that narrative, are less happy in their careers because they're too cautious and didn't take the risks necessary to advance in it. They don't have very good relationships because they're always suspicious of everybody, and they were depressed, they were anxious, as opposed to people whose narrative is, the world has dangers but also opportunities. That's an example of how the narratives we have in our heads influence our decisions, influence our relationships, influence our happiness.

That's why one person can face a series of setbacks and still feel energized because they have a narrative in their head that setbacks just make them stronger, where another person collapses in despair because their narrative is, "I'm doomed." Would you care to guess which one I am? And we all have multiple narratives in our head. Political, cultural, family narratives.

For instance, one of the narratives in my family when I was growing up is, you can fall apart emotionally, but you need to still function through it. It comes from my grandmother, who, as a

single mom, hauled our family out of poverty even though she struggled with depression herself. It's a helpful narrative for that, but it can be a dysfunctional narrative in other contexts. But my wife and I, without even knowing it, have passed that narrative on our kids.

One of the things we would sometimes say to them was when they were toddlers and they were throwing a fit, we'd say sometimes to them, "Crying is portable. You can take that crying to your room." And sadly, for some of you, that's the only thing you're going to get out of this sermon, crying is portable. There it is. There's that narrative. You can fall apart. That's okay, but you need to function through it. Now, if they were actually hurt, we would comfort them. It's just when they were throwing a fit.

Whenever I talk about our parenting, some of you're looking at me like, "Dear God, we need to pray for your kids." You totally need to pray for our kids. The narratives in our heads have enormous influence on our decisions, our relationships, our happiness. So it's really important to have good narratives. So for the next four weeks, we're going to do a series looking at some of the big themes, that meta narratives that run throughout scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

Today, I'm going to take on one of the biggest themes all in the Bible, redemption. Redemption, it's every... It's what the Bible is about, and it has two meanings. The first meaning is redemption means to set something free by paying a price. So for instance, back then in a war when people were captured and prisoners of war, their families would set them free by paying a price. It was called redeeming that person.

The second meaning is something that we see in our own culture, and it means to exchange something of lesser value or no value at all for something of greater value. So for instance, if you have a coupon for half price off something or a gift card, often there will be instructions on that gift card or that coupon on how to cash it in, quote, "redeem it," exchange something worthless for something more worthwhile, a worthless piece of paper for something worthwhile. We call that redeeming the coupon. So redemption has two meanings, to set something free through payment of a price, to exchange something of lesser value for something of greater value.

Now, usually in churches, when we use the word redeemed, we are referring to how Jesus sets us free from sin through payment of a price by dying on a cross to pay the price for our sins that needs to be paid or there's no justice. That's true. That's one meaning of redemption. But redemption is so much bigger than that because God doesn't just redeem us and our relationship with Him. God redeems everything, exchanges what is worthless for something of greater value. Exchanges our hurts for His healing exchanges, our mistakes for new opportunities. God restores all things, though caveat, not always to the way they used to be but to something different and new.

If the narrative we live by is that God redeems all things because He loves us, if that's our narrative, then we're going to have more hope even in hard times because we know God will exchange those worthless hard times for something of greater value. If that's our narrative, if redemption is our narrative, then we're going to take more risks. We're going to be more likely to try new things because we know even if we fail, God will bring good stuff out of it. I saw a meme this week on social media that said, "Don't let others ruin your day. It's your day. Ruin it yourself."

I'm so capable of doing that. What redemption means, though, is, nothing can be ultimately ruined by anyone or anything, even our own stupid mistakes. That is so freeing because I think a lot of times we worry about what college to go to, what job to take, who to marry, or how to raise our kids. Now, we need to make good decisions on all that, but sometimes we get paralyzed by fear, like, "Oh my gosh, what if I make a terrible, horrible mistake that ruins my entire life?" What redemption means is, your life is not that fragile. There is nothing. There is nothing beyond God's power to redeem, restore, renew, repair. So what feels broken in your life, what's discouraging, or what's disappointing? Or who do you know who is struggling with those things? Here's the good news. God is in the redemption business because he loves us, and redemption is in every book of the Bible.

So let me do just a brief plot summary of the whole Bible and touch on just a few places where we see what redemption means for our lives and how we live it. So in the beginning in Genesis, God creates everything. The pinnacle of His creation is human beings, Adam and Eve. God says, "You can eat from any tree in the garden, but there's one tree, it'll hurt you. So don't eat from that tree." But the enemy, the devil, Satan, he lies to them, Adam and Eve. He says, "God's trying to keep you from reaching your full potential." And they bought the lie and ate the forbidden fruit. The issue is not the fruit. The issue is, they rejected God and did things their own way, which we do all the time. As soon as they disobey God, they start to bicker with each other. Married couples have been bickering ever since. You can blame Adam and Eve for that. Then God comes along and he asks, "What happens here? What happened here?" And in the mother of all cop-outs, Adam says, "The woman you put here with me, she gave me some fruit from the tree. Okay, I guess I... It was just one bite, God." Adam faces his consequences like a man. He blames his wife. The big wimp, "It's her fault, God. It's not mine. Also, God, need I mention that You were the one who put her here? So I really think, God, You're not owning Your part of this. It's actually Your fault." Showing that we just cannot admit when we screw up and we've been hiding the things we're ashamed of ever since. How many of you could say right now, "I would be just fine if everyone in this room knew everything I do when nobody is looking. I'd be just fine if everyone in this room knew every little twisted thought I have in my head. I would be just fine if everyone knew that"? Anyone? Because I'll stop preaching if you want to tell us because we'd be fascinated.

We are just like Adam and Eve, rejecting God, doing things our own way. So now there's greed and lying and violence and all kinds of stuff, but God is in the redemption business because he loves us. So he makes a plan. So He makes a promise, and He says to Satan, who

tempted them, "I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel." So in other words, out of the same man and woman who screwed it all up in the first place, there will come a redeemer who will put an end to Satan, sin, and death. It's the first of many predictions of Jesus in the Old Testament. Amen.

Out of this worthless disaster comes something of great value, hope, that's redemption. What that shows us is that God's redemption is unstoppable. There is no situation so bad, even this one, which is pretty bad, that God can't redeem. I don't care what you dragged in here today with you. I don't care what the people you love are going through. There is nothing that can stop God's redemption if we partner with Him. He will exchange something worthless for something good. So Adam and Eve have kids, and their kids have kids, and the kids have kids, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Everyone turns out to be greedy, mean, violent, lying, and thieving, and all kinds of stuff. But God is in the redemption business.

So He has a plan that He will give His message that He's the God who loves us to one man named Abraham, and his descendants will become the nation of Israel. Their job is to spread the good news of God's love for us all around the world, to form an alternate society marked by justice, love, and mercy, and to spread that better way of living to the entire planet. So Abram has a son named Isaac. Isaac has Jacob. And Jacob has 12 sons. 12 sons. That's a big grocery bill. That's a lot of food. From those 12 sons comes the nation of Israel, divided into 12 tribes named after those 12 sons.

But here's the twist, they're really icky people. They're really icky people. They commit incest, rape, attempted fratricide murder. They're enmeshed, codependent, passive-aggressive, and borderline psychotic. You thought your family was screwed up. But God is in the redemption business and uses even them, in spite of their flaws, to bring good. Their family dysfunction reaches a high point when Jacob's sons try to kill their brother Joseph but instead decide to sell them into slavery in Egypt.

But God is in the redemption business. So Joseph makes a good impression on the king of Egypt, and he gets promoted from slave to prime minister. When a famine strikes, Joseph guides Egypt through it unharmed. Meanwhile, his brothers have to come because they're starving. They have to come to him to get food, and they're terrified that he's going to get revenge on them because they tried to kill him and then they sold him into slavery. But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. You intended it to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

That's redemption. What the enemy meant for evil, God will use for good. What the enemy has aimed at you, what the enemy is trying to do to you, whatever it is that the enemy is giving to you and shoving in your way, God will use it for good somehow, somehow, someday. It's like redeeming a coupon. God takes something worse than worthless evil and uses it for good.

What problems are you facing? Okay, it's probably not worse than having your siblings try to kill you and then sell you into slavery. If that has not happened to you this week, you're ahead of Joseph. If God can redeem even that, He can bring good out of whatever mess you are facing. So generations come, generations go, they multiply. A new king that did not know Joseph arises in Egypt, and he makes all the Israelites slaves until God calls one man named Moses to lead them out of slavery. God says, "I will free you from being slaves, and I will redeem you, redeem you with an outstretched arm." And Moses leads them out of Egypt to a land of their own. God embeds the concept of redemption deeply into their culture.

He tells them that as part of their worship from time to time, to take a lamb or another animal and symbolically place all the sins of all the people on that lamb and then slaughter it as an act of redemption, paying the price, setting people free from shame, guilt, and sin by paying the price for their sins, slaughter that lamb. It was an act of redemption, buying us out of sin by paying a price, exchanging the lamb for our forgiveness. All of it points to Jesus, who, in the New Testament, is called the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the once-and-for-all sacrifice, no more sacrifices are needed. Who redeems us by dying on a cross to pay the price for our sins that needs to be paid or there's no justice. He does that because He loves us more than we can imagine.

Now, this is tough for modern Westerners to get our brain around, like, "Why does Jesus have to die on a cross to forgive my sins? My sins aren't that bad. I have a little trivial things. I don't think someone has to die on a cross for that. Maybe get a good talking to, but nothing more than that." That's because we minimize our sin. Or as one man in my sermon review groups said this week, "I sometimes tend to think I'm just a little fine-tuning away from perfection." We sort of minimize our sin.

Take me, for example. I'm a good person. I'm a pastor. That means I'm a good person. I never committed adultery. I've never murdered anyone or stolen anything, but I have neglected people, including people closest to me like my wife and my kids. There have been occasions where I have manipulated people. I can have a shocking lack of compassion. Then there's, what I think, the angry, lustful, self-centered thoughts. Just because I sin in socially acceptable ways doesn't mean I'm not hurting people. Just because I sin in socially acceptable ways doesn't mean I'm not hurting people.

If the Holocaust taught us anything, it's that ordinary, good people can do horrible things under the right circumstances. The bureaucrats who signed the requisition forms for the gas canisters, for the death chambers, they went home every night and kissed their wife and kids and thought they were a good person. If I'm really honest, all of that, or at least a lot of that, is in me, and like a tube of toothpaste, squeeze me hard enough and it will come out. If we get real about that stuff in all of us, that cross starts to look a lot more necessary.

But God is in the redemption business. Jesus is our ultimate redeemer, who pays every price that needs to be paid. If we make Him our leader and our forgiver, then we are forgiven, freed from guilt and shame. We don't have to wallow in guilt and shame anymore, and His Holy Spirit is inside of us and, over time, begins to change us to be more like Him, making what is worthless within us worthwhile, renewing, restoring, repairing, setting us free. That's who Jesus is. That's what Jesus has done. That's what Jesus is doing. That's what Jesus will do in your life and mine. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so. We are set free. Amen.

God will continue to redeem until Jesus returns and sets everything right. Which brings us to the very end of the Bible where God gives the apostle John a vision and he says, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. I heard a loud voice saying, 'Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.' He was seated on the throne, said, 'I am making everything new.'"

Genesis 1 and Revelation 21 are the bookends of this one long story. Genesis 1 is creation out of nothing. Revelation 21 is a recreation out of the stuff of this life, our earth, our sorrows, and our suffering. The text says that on the gates of the heavenly city were written the names of the 12 tribes of Israel. The wall of the city had 12 foundations, and on them were the names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb, the 12 tribes of Israel, and the 12 apostles. Think about those stories in the Old Testament about those 12 tribes, incest, murder, fratricide, theft. That's the foundation for heaven? And then the 12 apostles are incompetent, always doing power games, messing up our sin-soaked ancestors, and these incompetent apostles are the pillars on which heaven rests?

What that shows me is that God uses the broken pieces of our lives and of our world to refashion something new out of it. Jesus says, "I make all things new." He does not say, "I make all new things." He takes the stuff of this earth and He uses it to form something new. It is significant that we don't go back to the garden. We start in a garden in Genesis, but we end in a city in Revelation. Because God doesn't rewrite history, He redeems it. God doesn't throw away Adam and Eve like a bad, rough draft and just start all over. That would be rewriting, not redeeming.

Some things that are lost are lost forever. We never go back to the garden. It's lost forever. But God uses the broken pieces of our lives and of this earth to fashion something new, which is better than the old thing because it shows the power of God to make everything new. God does not undo the messes we create for ourselves, which is a really good reason not to create those messes. Redemption is not an excuse for bad behavior, but if we create those messes, He uses those broken pieces to fashion something beautiful.

There's a guy I know named Bob who owned a construction company and got very, very rich remodeling homes, but then he got hooked on crack and on heroin and eventually ended up being homeless. But God is in the redemption business. Bob got into a recovery program, and in

that program, he discovered Jesus. When he got clean, Jesus started to nudge him to reach out to other drug addicts in Seattle. So now he brings together crack addicts, meth addicts. Some are homeless, some aren't. They read the Bible together. They discuss it, they pray together. He's given this group a name, church, for lack of a better word. That's their name. I want that to be our name, church, for lack of a better word. Miracles are happening. People are getting off drugs. They're living new lives. They've had physical healings.

In this conversation with me, and then he said, "So now I'm thinking of becoming a pastor." And I frowned. I was like, "Oh man, what a letdown." The story was going in such a good direction, and now you want to be a pastor. How cliché. But then he said, "But lately I've been thinking, 'I know how to build a construction business, and the people in my church, for lack of a better word, need jobs. What if I started a construction company and hired them, gave them skills and experience that would be a win for everyone.'" And I said, "Yes, that's a great idea. Then you can be with the folks in your church, for lack of a better word, not just as their pastor, but also as their boss." That is every pastor's dream.

He's being redeemed. God took the shattered pieces of his former life, addiction, homelessness, and is using those very same things to reach out to people in the same situation, but also using his construction knowledge, his entrepreneurial skills to fashion a new heaven and a new earth in him, through him, and for him, not the same as his former life. The wealth is gone. Some of those relationships are gone and gone forever, but something new made out of the old bits and pieces of his life. That's redemption.

I'll close with this. Years ago, our Sunday school kids did an art project where they layered different kinds of colored sand, various colored sand in layers to create this art project. Afterwards, a four-year-old girl was walking to the car with her parents and dropped the jar and it shattered and spilled sand all over the place. She was super upset by that, crying. One of our custodians at the time was there, and his hobby was photography. So he got his camera and he took a picture of all this different colored sand on the parking lot, and the picture turned out great. It looked like this giant, colored comet. So he framed the picture and he titled it Chloe's Comet. Then he gave it to her the next week. This little four-year-old girl, she was so happy. She was so thrilled. She was so excited, she didn't have her art project anymore because some things that are lost are lost forever. But the custodian took the shattered bits of it and fashioned something new and beautiful out of it. That's redemption.

So whatever you face today, or whatever people you know face today, God's promise here, God's promise to you, and live out of this narrative, there is no mistake that can't be used for good, no sin that can't be forgiven, no disaster that cannot be reclaimed for God's future. Nothing is so shattered that it cannot be transformed into something beautiful. He has taken all that breaks us and He has made it to be praise.

So Jesus, I pray this promise over every person in this room and online, that You take what breaks us and You make it praise. Jesus, You're the only one that can do it. It's only in Your name. It is only through Your power that You take what is broken and make it brand new. So Jesus, do that for us, and then help us to live out of a narrative that You are the redeeming God, that at the name of Jesus, all things will be restored. Help us to live out of that narrative, speaking Jesus to ourselves, to our communities, and to our families, because You are the God that redeems. Help us to live in the courage that that narrative gives us. In Your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Biblical Redemption means 1) to set something free through payment of a price 2) to make something new; exchange something of lesser value for something of greater value.
- From this passage, what different things are being redeemed/made new?
- What is the goal of all redemption?
- What is the significance of the foundations and the gates?
- Has God ever redeemed/made new some difficult situation in your life? Explain
- What situations in your life are in need of redemption/renewal?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.