

## INTRODUCTION

Did you hear the story about Billy Bob and Jethro, who were ice fishing one cold day in Minnesota? Billy Bob wasn't catching anything, but Jethro was steadily pulling fish out of the ice. Billy Bob says, "Jethro, what's your secret?" And Jethro says, "Mmu gmmg kmmum mmumms murm." Billy Bob said, "What? I didn't understand you." Jethro says, "Mmu gmmg kmmum mmuums murm." Billy Bob says, "What's wrong with you? I can't understand what you're saying!" Just then Jethro spits out a black glob into his hand and says, "You gotta keep the worms warm!"

Fortunately, down south we don't have to keep the worms warm! We don't know much about ice fishing, but East Texas is one of the greatest fishing areas in America. Most of us have gone fishing at one time or another. That's why you'll probably recognize the title of this message as a fishing term.

When a fisherman catches a fish, he may keep it and clean and eat it. I've done that plenty of times. But there are times when a fisherman will catch a fish and release it back into the water. Catch and release is practiced if the fish is too small, or if the fisherman is just fishing for sport. There is even a Catch and Release Foundation made up of sports anglers whose motto is, "Limit your catch, don't catch your limit."

The Texas Parks and Wildlife website even has some instructions for fishermen who want to participate in Catch and Release. Here are their instructions:

1. Decide to release the fish as soon as you hook it.
2. Set the hook quickly to reduce the likelihood the fish will swallow the bait.
3. Bring the fish in slowly from deep water to help it adjust to changing pressure.
4. Leave the fish in the water if you can and use a tool to remove the hook.
5. Handle the fish as little as possible to avoid injuring it.
6. Place the fish in the water, gently supporting the mid section until it swims away.

*Source: <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/fishboat/fish/recreational/catchrelease.phtml>*

As I studied this passage of scripture I thought it is a perfect example of God's Catch and Release program. We use the word "redemption" a lot, but one way to understand it is to compare it a catching and releasing a fish. It is an apt description of the process of salvation described in Colossians 1:12-14. And in this scenario, God is the Fisher of Men and we're the fish!

Colossians 1:12-14. "... (joyfully) giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

The first half of Colossians is all about belief or doctrine and the second half of the book is about behavior or duty. These three verses provide one of the clearest descriptions of the doctrine of

redemption found anywhere in the Bible. In this lesson I want to trace three life-changing actions Jesus executed on our behalf. These three aspects of redemption can be understood in three simple verbs: (1) Rescued; (2) Removed; (3) Released.

## **1. JESUS RESCUED US FROM DARKNESS**

Colossians 1:13 says, “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness.” I don’t know if fish can even think, but let me try to imagine I’m a largemouth bass for a few minutes. You can call me Bobby the Bass. So here I am swimming along slowly in the deep, dark water. Then suddenly I catch a flash of light as a spinning lure passes above me. I’m not looking to get caught or anything, but that looks interesting. Here I go! I move toward the light, and I grab that lure in my mouth. That’s what happened to me when I became a Christian. I was in the depths of darkness and there was something that attracted me to Jesus—and I moved toward the light and took God’s bait. The Bible says before we ever come to Christ, the Father will draw us, or lure us, to Jesus, the Light of the world. Jesus said in John 6:44, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”

Now, Bobby the Bass wasn’t looking to be rescued, but that’s what Jesus did for us: He rescued us from the darkness. We were all affected by Hurricane Katrina and the terrible aftermath of the flood. One image that will stay in our minds for a long time was the sight of helicopter crews rescuing survivors from their roofs. As the flood waters rose, residents looked to the sky and found the unmistakable orange rescue helicopters of the U.S. Coast guard. The Coast Guard had to quickly adapt their tactics for urban rescue missions. When the rescue efforts concluded, the Coast Guard estimates they hoisted 35,000 people from flooded areas—more rescues than they had done in the eight previous years nationwide. There’s something noble and exciting about a rescue effort, whether it’s helicopters plucking survivors from roofs or a team descending into a collapsed coal mine to find trapped miners. America is fascinated by rescues.

But the greatest rescue effort of human history occurred when the Creator sent His only begotten Son into this world to rescue sinners from hell. Jesus came to “seek and to save” (Luke 19:10) those who were lost—and that includes all of us. I was sinking deep in sin; far from the peaceful shore; very deeply stained within; sinking to rise no more; But the master of the sea, heard my despairing cry; From the waters lifted me; now safe am I! (Words by James Rowe, 1912)

### **Take Out Truth: Before I can be rescued, I must stop trying to save myself**

Now, let’s consider what I often call “The Take Out Truth. This is truth you can take with you and enjoy later as you meditate on it. Here’s the Take Out Truth: Before I can be rescued, I must stop trying to save myself.

As long as you think you don’t need to be rescued, or try to rescue yourself you can’t be rescued by Jesus. I remember hearing a story about an early American missionary who took the gospel to the Indians in Colonial times. He wasn’t fluent in their language, yet he was trying to demonstrate the meaning of salvation. With the leaders of the tribe gathered around him, he piled up twigs, leaves and sticks in a circle on the ground. Then he lit the sticks until there was a circle of fire. When the fire was blazing, the missionary took a little toad and placed it in the center of

the circle of fire. The poor toad hopped in one direction, only to be repelled by the heat. Then hopped in the opposite direction trying to find a way to escape—but all it encountered was heat, smoke and fire. After several attempts, the toad hopped to the very center of the circle, and stopped. It was obvious the toad had given up any efforts to escape. When that happened the missionary reached into the circle and plucked the toad from the fire. He placed it outside the fire and released it. As it hopped off into the night, the missionary said, “Toad was me. Fire was hell. When I quit trying to save myself, Jesus reached down and saved me.” The Indians smiled and nodded, having understood the message of redemption. When it comes to salvation, Jesus sought us, and caught us!

## 2. JESUS REMOVED THE PENALTY FOR OUR SINS

In Colossians 1:14 we read, “...in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Now back to Bobby the Bass for a minute. I’ve taken the bait, and feel myself being pulled toward the light. I’m thinking “Uh, oh, this is the end! I’d better fight as hard as I can!” Then when I catch a glimpse of the huge, omnipotent, fisherman, my heart is flooded with awe and fear. And then there’s this sharp thing sticking in my mouth that really hurts—the more I fight against it, the more the barb sticks me! Some of you are fighting against God’s tug right now.

It reminds me of what Jesus said to Saul on the road to Damascus, “Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” (Acts 26:14) A goad was a sharp stick. So, as Bobby the Bass, I come to a point where I realize fighting against the fisherman isn’t going to work, so I surrender to my death. But then, this big guy grabs me and does a strange thing: He removes the painful hook from my mouth. That’s a great picture of forgiveness. We are all hooked on sin, and Jesus lovingly removes the hook, the penalty for our sin. The penalty for my sin is to spend eternity separated from God in a place called hell. Forgiveness is God removing that penalty.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, English writer John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*, which many scholars believe is the greatest allegory in all of literature. Except for the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress* was the all-time best selling book of history, until the 1960s. Do you know what book dethroned it, and sold more copies? *Peyton Place*—how’s that for an indication about the moral deterioration of our culture?

The key character in *Pilgrim’s Progress* is a man named Christian. (It’s not hard to match the meaning of the allegory). Christian travels throughout the land trying to find ultimate truth. But until he finds that truth, he carries a heavy load of sin on his back. When he meets Evangelist, he says to him, “I fear that this burden upon my back will sink me lower than the grave, and I shall fall into hell and the thoughts of these things make me cry.” Like Christian, we are all carrying a load of sin. Christian discovered the only place to unload his weight of sin was to surrender it to Jesus Christ.

### **Take Out Truth: I owed a debt I could not pay, so Jesus paid it for me**

That leads us to our Take Out Truth: I owed a debt I could not pay, so Jesus paid it for me.

The basic meaning of the word *redeem* is to “buy back” or “to purchase.” God is holy and He demands atonement (payment) be made for sin. We could never pay the debt we owe: We must declare spiritual and moral bankruptcy. When He redeemed us, Jesus stepped up to the cross to pay a debt we can’t pay. He not only sought us and caught us—He BOUGHT us!

Grace is free—but it isn’t cheap. It cost Jesus everything. There is a powerful verse that explains what it cost Jesus to buy us back from sin. “For you know the GRACE of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Picture this: Jesus enjoyed the riches and majesty of heaven. But he willingly stepped down from glory to offer Himself as a sacrifice of sin. He emptied His spiritual bank account in purchasing our salvation. The result is that we are forgiven and we can experience the riches of His grace. Do you know how much it costs Jesus to buy your forgiveness? It took His ALL.

Before you can fully appreciate the value of forgiveness, you must understand the depth of your sin and depravity. After WWII, many of Nazis who committed atrocities against Jews were put on trial for their actions. At one trial a Jew who had endured horrors at a concentration camp was brought into the courtroom to testify against his persecutors. On the stand, he started weeping profusely upon seeing the accused criminals. When asked why he wept, the answer he gave was powerful. Rather than saying he wept because of flashbacks of the horrors he endured, he said that he wept because he was terrified—but not at the Nazi criminals. He said what scared him was as he saw their faces he recognized they were normal people, not madmen. It dawned on him for the first time that he, too, was capable of committing the same atrocities he had experienced.

You may consider yourself a better person than some of the criminals who are sitting on death row, but there is within the heart of each of us the capacity for horrible evil. The Bible says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, desperately wicked, who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9) No matter how “good” you may think you are; you can never pay the debt of sin that you owe.

### **3. JESUS RELEASED US INTO THE LIGHT**

It says in Colossians 1:13 “and brought us into the kingdom of the son he loves...the kingdom of light.” So let’s return once more to our friend, Bobby the Bass. The fisherman has me in his hands. He has removed the painful hook. But what’s going to happen next? I’ve heard horror stories from old Uncle Bluegill about fish being strung up, cut open, fried and eaten. Is that going to be my fate? Am I headed for the frying pan? But no, what’s he doing? I’m back in the water! I feel his pressure releasing me...Yes, I’m free! I’m free! I swim away singing “Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it!” I’ll never be the same fish again!

Jesus not only sought us, caught us, and bought us, He taught us that when we know the truth, the truth will set us free! And Jesus said, “When the son of man sets you free, you shall be free indeed!” (John 8:36)

**Take Out Truth: When I walk in the light, I am walking with God!**

Here’s the Take Out Truth: When I walk in the light, I am walking with God! 1 John 1:7 says, “God is light, in him is no darkness at all...if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his son, purifies us from all sin.”

When God saves you, He doesn’t just place you in a vacuum. You aren’t saved to neutrality. He saves us and transfers us into the Kingdom of His Son. The story of redemption is one of being rescued, having the penalty of sin removed, and then being released into a new kind of life. No longer are we in the kingdom of darkness, we are in the kingdom of light! And as you walk in the light, you will live a different kind of life.

We have been set free! I remember a few years ago, we had Heather Mercer speak here at Green Acres. You may recall Heather was one of eight Christian Aid workers kidnapped by the Taliban in Afghanistan. She was held captive for three months, and her captors told her many times she would die at their hands. Then as Heather told us about the day when the Taliban captors fled and they were able to leave and find American forces, she cried, and there wasn’t a dry eye in this building. The joy of being set free was still so fresh and powerful in her life that we all shared her emotion over her liberation. Then she spoke about how we have all been set free from the bondage of sin, and we should be more thrilled about that liberation than about her liberation from the Taliban. I agree! Do you realize what Jesus has done for you by saving you, forgiving you, and then setting you free? If you do, you will be totally committed to living a different kind of life.

## CONCLUSION

In my opinion, one the best movies to come out Hollywood over the past ten years was the WWII epic, “Saving Private Ryan.” It was based on a true story about four brothers who fought in WWII, and three of them died. It was nominated for best picture in 1998, but lost to “Shakespeare in Love”—a real classic. (That’s just another example of how out of touch the Oscar voters are!)

In “Saving Private Ryan,” Tom Hanks plays Captain Miller, who has been assigned to find private James Ryan after the Normandy Invasion. Because three of his brothers had already given their lives, military command decided to find Ryan and send him home.

The movie depicts the horror of the Normandy invasion and the sacrifice that was paid by the 6,000 brave soldiers who gave their lives. Captain Miller leads his Ranger platoon deep behind enemy lines to find a single soldier. When they finally reach Private Ryan, they find themselves defending a bridge against overwhelming German odds. They man a brave defense, and in the process of the battle most of the Rangers die and Captain Miller is mortally wounded.

In one of the most powerful scenes, Private Ryan, played by Matt Damon, kneels before Captain Miller. The captain, who was a high English teacher, husband and father, is bleeding badly and knows he’s about to die. So, he grabs Ryan by his collar and says, “James, earn this...earn it!” Then the movie flashes forward 50 years to an elderly James Ryan visiting the Normandy American Memorial Cemetery. With his family in the background, Ryan kneels before the grave of John Miller, overcome by emotion. He thinks back on his life and how he tried to live a life

worthy of the sacrifice made by those brave soldiers. As he sinks to knees, his wife rushes to his side, and he asks her, “Have I led a good life? Am I a good man?” Realizing why he is asking that profound question, his wife pauses and says sincerely, “Yes, of course you are. You are a good man.” It’s at that moment James Ryan feels he has honored John Miller’s charge to “earn this.”

When I think of that scene, I can’t help but compare it my own salvation. Private Ryan represents you and me. We were lost in an epic battle between good and evil, and the High Command of heaven sent His most precious person to seek and to save us. And Jesus would have come to this earth for us if we had been the ONLY sinner needing a Savior. He is the kind of good shepherd who leaves the 99 safe sheep and risks His life to find that one lost lamb. Just as those Rangers and Captain Miller died to save Private Ryan, my Lord went to the cross to die for me. Jesus said, “Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)

The movie causes the viewers to debate the issue, “Is one life worth saving, even at the risk of other lives?” Private Ryan never did anything to *earn* that kind of sacrifice. He was a stranger to those soldiers who saved him. In the same way, we can’t earn our salvation either. Captain Miller didn’t die for Private Ryan because he had earned it. He didn’t say, “Earn my sacrifice. Show me you’re worthy, and then I’ll die for you.” No, he died for him *before* he earned it. And that’s what Jesus did for us. The Bible says in Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrated His love toward us that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

This is a great illustration of the relationship between salvation and good works. There is nothing you can do to earn your salvation, but once you have been redeemed, you will forevermore want to live a life full of good works. Because of the cross we should live all of our days in a way that reflects our gratitude for the gift He gave us.

That’s what Paul wrote in Colossians 1:10, “We pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way.” You see we don’t live a good life in order to earn our salvation. But because of the death of Jesus on the cross, we strive to live a good life in order to demonstrate our gratitude for His sacrifice. You had no chance nor power to earn that kind of love before Jesus died, but you have every single day now to honor His sacrifice by your devotion and obedience.

Redemption is a lot like catch and release. He is the Fisher of Men. Salvation is all about Jesus. Jesus sought you, caught you, brought you, bought you, and taught you; then He released you into this world to live a life worthy of that kind of love. And when you stand before God, He won’t ask you, “Have you lived a good life?” He will ask you what you did in relation to His son Jesus. And if you have placed your faith and trust in Jesus, you can kneel before God and hear Him say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” (Matthew 25:21)

## OUTLINE

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes