

Redeemer of the Helpless

by Rolaant McKenzie



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Janet Miriam Holland Taylor Caldwell (September 7, 1900–August 30, 1985), who mainly wrote under the name Taylor Caldwell, was a British-born American novelist and author of many books of biographical historical fiction, a sub-genre of literature that deals with real historical figures, places, and times with some artistic license for fictional elements to fill gaps in the story.

Caldwell was born in Manchester, England into a family of Scottish ancestry. At the age of six, she won a medal for an essay on Charles Dickens. When she turned seven, she emigrated with her parents to the United States where, at age twelve, she wrote her first novel, *The Romance of Atlantis*.

One of her best-known works was the 1965 novel, *A Pillar of Iron*, which told the story of the famed Roman lawyer, orator, politician, statesman, scholar, and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero (January 3, 106 BC–December 7, 43 BC).

Cicero came from a wealthy family in the town of Arpinum, located in central Italy. His extensive philosophical and political writings provide ample insight into his life and times, which included political corruption and instability in Rome, the end of the republic, civil war, and the establishment of dictatorship. After his education in Rome and Greece, he served in the military under General Pompeius Strabo (the father Pompey the Great). His legal career began when he was in his 20s, where he distinguished himself in the

courts as a brilliant defense attorney.

In Chapter 16 of *A Pillar of Iron*, Caldwell depicted Cicero, protégé of the eminent lawyer Scaevola, taking on his first case before the Roman Senate. The Consul was present as magistrate over the proceedings. The aedile, or court officer, announced the next case before the senators, who functioned as the jury.

In the center of the chamber floor was Cicero's client. Persus, a plebeian and small farmer outside the gates of Rome, stood bound in chains along with his wife Maia, and their two children – a ten-year-old boy and a six-year-old girl. The charge against him was failure to pay the taxes levied by Rome. Persus' farm and household goods were already seized, yet his debt was less than half paid. He, Maia, and their children were to be sold as slaves to settle the remaining debt.

Persus, his weeping wife, and their frightened and crying children, looked imploringly at Cicero. Their slender and gaunt bodies, their wide and tormented eyes, emphasized their abject suffering and helplessness. Cicero, feeling compassion for his client and his family, went to them and quietly spoke words of comfort and hope to them.

With his hand gently on Persus' shoulder, Cicero faced the Consul and assembly of senators. With eloquence and passion, he defended his client. He did not question the existence of the tax laws or argue whether Persus owed the taxes or not. He described the increasing tax burden placed upon the average Roman citizen working hard to support their families, and how this too often caused them to fall farther and farther behind, resulting in the situation of his client. Persus battled against mounting debt while caring for his family and lost everything. Cicero directed the senators to the utter helplessness of his client and appealed to them to show mercy.

The Consul then rose from his chair and addressed the senators:

“You have heard. I recommend that this prisoner be set free, and his wife and children with him. As he has lost all, through our command, I order that that which we have taken be restored to him.”

The majority of the senators, moved by Cicero’s defense, concurred with the Consul’s recommendation and granted clemency to Persus and his family. His tax debt was forgiven, their chains removed, and his farm and household goods restored.

The Consul turned to Persus and his family and said,

“Go in peace. Be industrious as always. Implore the gods that they, and your fellow Romans, visit no more affliction upon you.”

Cicero consoled and congratulated Persus and his family, who had fallen to their knees before the Consul with raised hands in tearful adoration. They also wept with gratitude and joy as they kissed Cicero’s hands and garments.

This account of Persus in the story of Cicero reminds me of the way Jesus compared our sins to not only breaking God’s law, but also to a debt owed to God. Consider how Jesus expressed this idea in the renditions of the Lord’s Prayer found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke:

“Pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. **And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.** And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.’” (Matthew 6:9-13)

"And He said to them, When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. **And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.** And lead us not into temptation.'" (Luke 11:2-4)

Debtors' prisons of a few centuries ago in Western Europe were places where persons unable to pay off their debts incurred from back taxes or court-ordered judgments would be incarcerated until they had worked it off in hard labor that went towards both the costs of their imprisonment as well as their accrued debt. Our sins are debts to God that we cannot pay, and no amount of labor, tears, guilt, repentance, self-denial, self-flagellation, or law keeping can change this. It is like being sent in chains to debtors' prison with no way out because no amount of labor will ever pay off the debt owed.

Some, especially those in religions focused on law keeping as a way of being right with God, rigorously follow a set of rules they erroneously think will cause God to owe them His blessing or salvation. Abraham, one of the most righteous men in Scripture, could not cause God to be indebted to him by his good works. His righteousness before God came from believing His word.

"For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.' Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. **But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness**" (Romans 4:2-5)

We might naturally expect God would only justify a godly man, but then we realize that no one is godly enough to merit His justification. We all stand guilty, in an indebted state impossible for us to remedy. But because of what Jesus did on

the cross, God can justify the ungodly. He pays in full the debt by His shed blood for anyone who sees their indebted state and trust in Him alone. We bring nothing to the table to bargain with God. We cannot negotiate our debt with God to come to an outcome favorable to us. Instead, we cease our efforts and believe on Him who justifies the ungodly by paying in full our debt (John 6:28-29).

“When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, **having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us**, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13-14)

The “certificate of debt” from this passage comes from the Greek word *cheirographon*. It describes a handwritten document of monetary indebtedness, but it can also have a legal meaning. It can be a sheet on which are written the criminal charges against a prisoner. In fact, the expression “paying one’s debt to society”, illustrating the situation where a prisoner has completed his period of incarceration, is derived from this word. Either way, before God, such a document reveals our failings and condemns us.

But as Jesus passes bankrupt criminals from death into life who have faith in Him (John 5:24), He stamps in His blood on the debt certificate, “It is finished!” (John 19:30) (Greek: *tetelestai*, English: *paid in full*), and takes it out of the way by nailing it on the cross.

Like the tax collector in Jesus’ parable who recognized his sinful state and sought God’s mercy as he prayed in the temple (Luke 18:9-14), anyone who realizes his sinful indebtedness before God and because of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice appeals to Him for forgiveness will receive full cancellation of his debt and salvation from the eternal debtors’ prison of hell. By

faith in Christ alone, you pass out of death into eternal life
(John 5:24).

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