

June 28, 2015

Power in the Blood

HEBREWS 9:1 – 28

At the very core of Christianity is the blood of a perfect sacrifice. At the center of the gospel proclamation is an incredibly bloody scene. I think everyone who saw the movie, *The Passion*, was stunned by the bloody gore depicted in the scenes where Jesus is whipped to a bloody pulp and then nailed to the cross to bleed out. A bloody sacrifice is at the heart of the Gospel message. But more and more people today look at this bloody sacrifice and reject it because they think this makes God sound like a blood-thirsty barbarian. When contemporary people hear it said that God requires blood to appease His wrath from sin, it sounds offensive. It sounds disgusting. It sounds primitive. It sounds obscene. It sounds, in the words of a liberal theologian, Harry Emerson Fosdick, like a 'slaughterhouse religion'.

This rejection of the idea that God would send His Son to a violent, bloody death for the sins of mankind is gaining more and more traction among people who call themselves Christians today. In an interview, Christian author and speaker, Brian McLaren questioned the idea of a God sending His Son to a violent death calling it false advertising for God: ***'That in the end, God gets His way through coercion and violence and intimidation and domination, just like every other kingdom does. The cross isn't the center then. The cross is almost a distraction and false advertising for God.'*** What we need, they say, in this world of increasing violence and blood is a message of peace and joy and where in the end, love wins. But all throughout Hebrews and indeed, all throughout the rest of the Bible, what we see are blood-spattered pages. And right here in this passage the writer is telling us that there is power in the blood. We see the problem of blood, the power of blood and the promise of blood. The problem, power and promise.

Look at the first few verses. ***1 Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. 2 For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. 3 Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, 4 having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. 5 Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat...These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, 7 but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.***

What this is describing is the Old Testament tabernacle worship. It was put in place to answer the question, 'How does sinful man come into the presence of an absolutely holy God?' 'How can we connect with God? And the answer was the only way to come into His presence without being destroyed was through blood. Down a bit in twelve and thirteen, the writer says that the blood of goats and calves and bulls and the ashes of a heifer were necessary for that to happen. There was no way into God's presence without blood. If you wanted to worship God, you had to go to the tabernacle. But you couldn't just go through the entrance and march up to the Holy of Holies and walk into His presence. You had to pass several altars. You had the altar of burnt offering, the altar of incense and finally the ark of the covenant that had the mercy seat over it. And if you read through the instructions for setting this up, you find that everything in the tabernacle had been sprinkled with blood. Old Testament tabernacle worship was inaugurated with blood.

Furthermore, people couldn't just wander in. There were basically three sections: the outer court, the Holy place, and the Holy of Holies. Anyone could get in the outer court, but only the priests could go into the Holy Place, and only one guy, the high priest could get into the place where God's presence dwelt, and only once a year. And the thing was, from the outer court to the very interior, you could only go in with blood. Blood had to be shed. You couldn't get anywhere near without blood. Sacrifices had to be made. Blood was shed in the outer court, blood was sprinkled in the Holy Place, and once a year the high priest offered blood on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. And over in chapter 10 the writer says this had to go on continually: ***And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.*** Over and over, day after day, again and again, blood had to be shed, sacrifices had to be offered, for you to approach God.

So what is it about blood that is so important? What does that mean? Why risk the idea that Christianity comes from some kind of blood-thirsty deity? First of all blood signifies both positive and negative things. Negatively, at the very least, the presence of blood means that something is broken. If you have blood gushing out of your body that's most likely a very bad sign that things are not well with you. Something's broken, death may be close by. The presence of **blood means brokenness**. Blood also signifies guilt. Again and again you can read, not only in the Bible, but also secular literature about the idea that you've done wrong and you have blood on your hands. That means you're guilty. The people that called out for Jesus to be crucified sealed their guilt by saying, '*His blood be on us and our children!*' **Blood means guilt. But blood also stains.** There's a consequence that happens. You are reminded of your guilt because it leaves a stain. There's that famous scene in MacBeth where Lady MacBeth is trying to get the stain of murder out of her hands and keeps washing and rubbing them and crying, 'Out, damned spot! Out I say!' The blood of her guilt had left an invisible, yet indelible stain that hounded her to her grave.

So why do we have all these blood sacrifices? What's the meaning here? You see, thousands of animals every year had to be slaughtered for sacrifice. The altar of sacrifice was a veritable fountain of blood. And you couldn't draw near to God without it. First of all this tells us that **our situation is incredibly serious**. It says that the thing that is wrong with us is so bad that blood must be spilled. You know that a crime is serious when it calls for the death penalty. Christianity would be of no help if all it consisted of was wise advice and moral teaching and examples to live by. That won't cure the problem. The solution to the problem is radical because the brokenness and sinfulness of humanity is too deep to cure any other way.

Secondly, the offering of blood means **admission of guilt**. We're guilty. We're broken and wounded, creation itself is broken, and we are not only complicit in it, we caused it. As G.K. Chesterton once said in reply to the question sent out by the editors of the London Times: What is wrong with the world? 'Dear Sirs,' he responded, 'I am'. Thirdly we need a way to **deal with the stain**. We can't wash our hands enough to rid us of the stain, the shame that comes with sin. We have all these 'damned spots' on us that won't wash out. We can appease our conscience for a bit, but we have to keep offering the sacrifice again and again and again. We're still in the tabernacle. We're doing all sorts of things to heal our conscience, but nothing lasts. Because verse nine tells us that in this tabernacle '*...gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper.*'

That's the problem. The conscience. That's where the writer is going with this. The blood of bulls and calves and goats are not equal to the task of cleansing our conscience. '*...how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*' A purified conscience is what we need. What is that? Very simply, our conscience is our self-evaluation of how fit we are to be in someone's presence. The first thing that happened in the garden when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, was that they had an attack of conscience. They became aware for the first time they were naked, then they felt ashamed and then they hid themselves. You see the point of a clean conscience the writer says is to serve or worship God – to draw near to Him. And for that you need a clean conscience.

Having a bad conscience is really having a sense that your life just can't bear close examination. It is an awareness that if people really knew who you were they would reject you. If they really knew your motives, if they really knew your awful thoughts, if they really knew what you were like when it was dark, they wouldn't want to be around you. What the writer is telling us is that a religious effort, a moral approach, doing good deeds won't help us. Our problem is too deep, too profound. We are not fit to stand in the presence of God. We'd fail the exam. We have to cover up, we have to hide, we can't stand the searchlight of His glory. We are all doing what we can to mitigate the problem, but because the offerings of the tabernacle are not effective in dealing with the guilt and the stain, we keep having to do stuff. We're in the tabernacle trying to cover up this sense that we're not what we ought to be, to deal with the fact that our consciences are not clean. Trying to deal with the fact that we know if people really looked inside and could really see what we were like, they'd see how weak we were, how wrong we were, how stained we were, how guilty we were.

The problem of guilt and the stain of guilt are profound. The whole world acknowledges the problem. And the whole world is busy in the tabernacle trying to mitigate the problem. There are books and websites and relationship gurus who have all kinds of advice on how to deal with guilt.

One website that claimed to be able to rid you of guilt said this: ***Guilt is the worst experience known to humans. It ties us up in knots and makes us feel unworthy and miserable. First, let me explain that it is not a real feeling.*** In other words, you really don't have a problem – there's no such thing. It's all a figment of your imagination and once you understand that, you're good to go. Another expert offered this advice to deal with guilt: ***Very simply, you begin by relaxing with a basic meditation. Then you let the guilt grow stronger in your mind. Let it grow and become stronger. Then, with as much mental force as you can muster, shout "STOP!"*** Another said: ***Guilt probably evolved as a mechanism to avoid attack. Stealing food, for example, would provoke an attack. Fear would have been the emotion accompanying the attack. Eventually, the fear probably followed the act of stealing but preceded the retaliatory attack thereby becoming a form of anticipation. Guilt is the anticipation of punishment.*** So guilt becomes nothing more than an evolutionary response.

But the common theme is that guilt is a problem. Everyone acknowledges this. The problem is deep and it leaves an indelible stain on our conscience. But that isn't the worst of it. The writer tells us that a guilty conscience in this life is bad, but there is a day coming when all the cover-up we've tried to do will be exposed. ***And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.*** In other words, we've got to have a permanent solution to this problem, one that will pass on judgment day. We need to know **the power of the blood**. We've talked about the negative significance of the blood, so let's move on to the positive significance.

Leviticus tells us that 'the life of the flesh is in the blood'. Blood represents life. There's no life without blood. Life comes into the world through blood. I grew up on a ranch and saw lots of animals born and there was always blood at the birth. I was at every birth of each of my daughters and there was lots of blood. There's no life without blood. But the writer is also talking about the blood that is shed voluntarily. Speaking of Jesus he says, ***He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.*** You see, because the blood represents the life, when it's voluntary, it implies the redemptive power of self-giving, the redemptive power of self-sacrifice.

Ernest Gordon was an Allied prisoner of war in a Japanese POW camp in southeast Asia, and he wrote a book of his experience called *Through the Valley of the Kwai*. It has been made into a movie that some of you may have seen called, 'To End All Wars'. In the book he tells the story of one day when the POWs were out working: "The day's work had ended; the tools were being counted, as usual. As the party was about to be dismissed, the guard shouted that a shovel was missing. The guard insisted that someone had stolen it. Striding up and down before the men, the guard ranted and raved, working himself into a fury. Screaming in broken English, he demanded that the guilty one step forward to take his punishment. No one moved; the guard's rage reached new heights of violence. 'Then, all die! All die!' he shrieked."

"To show that he meant what he said, he cocked his rifle, put it on his shoulder aimed at the first man in the rank, prepared to shoot and work his way down the line. At that moment, a soldier from the Argyll regiment stepped forward, stood stiffly to attention, and said calmly, 'I did it.' The guard unleashed all his whipped-up hate, kicking the helpless prisoner and beating him with his fists. Still, the Argyll stood rigidly to attention, chin up, though, now his blood was streaming all down his face. His calm silence seemed to goad the guard into greater rage. Seizing his rifle by the barrel, the guard lifted it high over his head and brought it down on the skull of the Argyll, who sank limply to the ground and never moved again. Though it was perfectly clear he was dead, the guard continued to beat him and stopped only when he was exhausted. The men of the work detail picked up their comrade's body, marched back to camp, and when the tools were counted again at the guard-house, it turned out that no shovel was missing."

The rest of the men were literally **saved by his blood**. This was an innocent man who shouldered the guilt for everyone else. His blood was shed so that their's would not be. Do you think this might have had an impact on them? Do you think that through the years they might think back to that one day when they should have died and didn't? Don't you think that maybe later in life when they were tempted to be selfish and mean they would remember that this guy gave his life so unselfishly and be moved to do the same? Even now when I read this I feel the power of that incredibly unselfish act. But what if the blood **were** shed for me? That's what the Bible says is the very centerpoint of history. One man gave His life for the many. Don't be tempted to think of God as some primitive deity who demands your blood. ***The good news is that He doesn't demand your blood. He offers His own.*** That's the point the writer is trying to make.

But still, people ask, 'If He is God, why can't He just forgive? Why can't He just make some sort of pronouncement and say, 'You're forgiven?' Why is blood necessary here? Blood is necessary because only blood is able to cleanse the stain of guilt through forgiveness. In four horrific months in 1994, at the urging of the Rwandan government, the poorer Hutu majority took up bayonets and machetes and committed genocide against the wealthier Tutsi minority. In the wake of this unspeakable tragedy, nearly a million people had been murdered. In August of 2003, driven by overcrowded prisons and backlogged court systems, 50,000 genocide criminals, people who had already confessed to killing strangers, their friends and their neighbors, were released again into society. Murderers were sent back to their homes, back to neighborhoods literally destroyed at their own hands, to live beside the few surviving relatives of the very men, women, and children they killed.

But what happens when a killer comes home; what happens when victims, widows, orphans, and murderers look each other in the eyes again; what happens when the neighbor who killed your family asks to be **forgiven**? How does a culture wash away the wounds of genocide? For Steven Gahigi, that question is answered with one word - **forgiveness**. An Anglican clergyman who lost 142 members of his family in the Rwandan genocide, he thought he had lost the ability to forgive. Though his inability plagued him, he had no idea how to navigate through a forgiveness so costly. **"I prayed until one night I saw an image of Jesus Christ on the cross...I thought of how he forgave, and I knew that I and others could also do it."** Inspired by this vision, Gahigi somehow found the words to begin preaching forgiveness. He first did this in the prisons where Hutu perpetrators sat awaiting trial, and today he continues in neighborhoods where the victims of genocide live beside its perpetrators. Miroslav Volf, himself familiar with vicious bloodletting in Croatia and Serbia, describes forgiveness as the exchange of one form of suffering for another, modeled to the world by the crucified Christ. He writes, **"[I]n a world of irreversible deeds and partisan judgments redemption from the passive suffering of victimization cannot happen without the active suffering of forgiveness."**

You see, when injustice happens, when offenses happen, there are only two things you can do. One is you can work hard to pay the perpetrators back in kind. You can find ways to make them suffer and pay down the debt. The other thing you can do is forgive. If you make the perpetrator pay, there's a big problem. It's a huge problem, and that is the evil done to you, the injustice done to you gets into you, and you become the perpetrator. The only alternative is not to make the perpetrator pay, but to forgive. When you forgive, when you begin to realize what it means to forgive, it means not only **not** making the perpetrator suffer, but not allowing yourself to be mean-spirited toward them, and thinking bad thoughts about them, and hating that person in your own heart. In other words, you will suffer. If you choose to forgive, you will suffer. And it's agony, its thorns and nails and whips to your own back – it's a cross.

When a wrong happens, either you suffer or the person that wrongs you suffers. If that is true of us, how much more with God? When He looks at our rebellion and sin, there are only two things that can happen. He can judge us and we suffer, our blood is shed; or He can forgive us and then He suffers, He pays the debt, His blood is shed. When you stand back and look at the cross, you have to see that real forgiveness means real suffering. Someone had to suffer and die, and it was God who said, 'I'll take your place.' God in Christ came down to where we live, not to demand our blood, but to shed His own blood in our place. His solution was not to meet hostility and violence against Him with hostility and violence against us. But rather He absorbed the evil without payback so that He could destroy the power of evil without destroying us. *When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to him who judges justly.* 1 Peter 2:23

This is powerful. The blood of Jesus is powerful because there is cleansing and forgiveness in the blood. Verse 22 says, *'...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.'* At a great parliament of religions, held in Chicago many years ago, practically every known religion was represented. During one session, Dr. Joseph Cook, of Boston, suddenly rose and said: "Gentlemen, I beg to introduce to you a woman with a great sorrow. Bloodstains are on her hands, and nothing she has tried will remove them. The blood is that of murder. She has been driven to desperation in her distress. Is there anything in your religion that will remove her sin and give her peace?" A hush fell upon the gathering. Not one of the company replied. Raising his eyes heavenwards, Dr. Cook then cried out, "John, can you tell this woman how to get rid of her awful sin?" The great preacher waited, as if listening for a reply. Suddenly he cried, "Listen. John speaks: *'The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sins'* (1 John 1:7)."

Not a soul broke the silence: the representatives of Eastern religions and Western cults sat dumb. In the face of human need, the Gospel of Jesus Christ alone could meet the need. The sin of the race demanded the blood of Calvary. That's the power of the blood.

So what is the promise of the blood? Look at verse 24: *For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.* The promise is that Jesus is now in the presence of God on our behalf. Verse 25 says that He does not come there empty-handed, but on our behalf, He presents His own blood to atone for our sins. We have a problem, a serious problem. We have to one day face the Judge of all the earth. And we have blood on our hands. We are blood-guilty. Maybe we've tried to wash and scrub the stains away, but there they are. And this text tells us: *'...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment'*. There's no getting out of this. The wrong is too massive; the stains are too deep. We need someone to speak on our behalf. And that is what Jesus does. In fact we'll see in chapter 12 that it is His blood that speaks for us: *But you have come to...God, the Judge of all...and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

Jesus' own blood is speaking for us in heaven. It's saying what we discovered a couple weeks ago in chapter seven: 'Father, I know that they're guilty. There's no question of guilt and their blood deserves to be shed. But, Father, I already shed My own blood on their behalf. I made a new covenant in My blood and it would be unjust for You to require two payments for the same debt. So because I've already made payment for this debt, I am not here asking for mercy, I am demanding justice. And Father, Your justice, Your very righteousness, demands that You embrace and eternally accept these for whom I died'. That is what verse 15 tells us. Since Jesus died for us, and shed His blood for us, *'...those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance'*.

When you see this, it will utterly transform your life. It will run deep into your center and change the motives of your heart. If Jesus was just a great man who taught us moral principles to live by, His death has no transforming power. If His death was simply an exercise to show us how much He loved us, that won't really change you. Suppose you and your friend were walking along a street and your friend turns to you and says, 'Let me show you just how much I love you' and he runs out into the street and throws himself in front of a big semi. Are you going to say, 'Oh, how he loved me?' Or are you going to say, 'What an idiot!' But if on the other hand you're walking along and the semi comes barreling up the sidewalk and at the cost of his life he shoves you out of the way to safety, then you say, 'Oh how he loved me!' That moves you, that changes you. If we were not in mortal danger and Jesus died for us, that doesn't change us. That won't transform the motives of our heart.

You stand in the presence of God because of the blood of Christ, in spite of your flaws. Finally, you can say, "I'm that loved. I'm that cared for. I've been bought with a price," and that finally gets rid of the tabernacle; it gets rid of the constant sacrifice, the constant efforts, to make yourself feel okay. You see it is the blood of Christ, the sacrifice of Jesus that transforms us from the inside out. This chapter tells us that we are always trying to cleanse the spots. We're offering as it were continual sacrifices, and it's not working. But verse fourteen says, *'...how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

You see, our problem is not just the fact that we are stained with sin, but here the writer says that it is our constant efforts, our dead works, to try and scrub the spots out ourselves that is the issue. We are trying to be our own savior. We're trying to control God by doing good things to outweigh the bad things we've done and get God to accept us. We're offering up goats and bulls and calves in an effort to win divine approval. We're buying into the lie that says, 'If I do good stuff then God has to accept me'. But the gospel says 'I am accepted through the blood of Christ that is now being offered in heaven on my behalf.' The motives of our hearts are transformed. I am no longer doing good things to be accepted; I am accepted therefore I do good things. You are not working merely to avoid condemnation; you are working to please the One who died for you. You are not trying to keep the law of God; it is now written on your mind and in your heart. Your life becomes the overflow of gratitude to the God who took your place and shed His own blood so that yours would not be. And your highest ambition becomes, to one day see Him face to face. *so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him.*

Heavenly Father,

We thank You this morning for the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from every stain. The stain of sin is so deep that nothing can wash it away except the blood of a perfect sacrifice. Forgive our feeble and sinful attempts to make ourselves acceptable to You and cause us to know that we are accepted this morning in Your Beloved Son. Turn our hearts God-ward this morning and every other morning. Capture our affections and enthrall us with Yourself. Break the power of sin in our lives that would lead us to seek and savor everything besides You, and draw our hearts to Heaven. Cause us to worship You with focused abandon, and let the glory of Your Presence entice us to remain, we pray in the present and powerful name of Jesus, Amen.