

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 14, 2021

There's Life in the Blood

Hebrews 9:11-15

If you want to get a sense of how important the blood of Christ is in our faith, just listen to a lot of our singing. Our hymns are filled with blood imagery: "My hope is built on nothing less / Than Jesus' blood and righteousness." "What can wash away my sin? / Nothing but the blood of Jesus." "His blood can make the foulest clean, / Blessed be the name of the Lord!" "Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power? / Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?" "Would you be free from the burden of sin? / There's power in the blood."

Editor Ted Olsen talks about what it's like to sing these songs. He says:

I have a funny reaction to these hymns: I love them. They are among the most common songs that get stuck in my head.... What's ironic is that like about 4 percent of the US population, I am mildly hemophobic. Seeing blood or hearing people describe injuries makes my heart rate and blood pressure drop. But somehow I can sing, "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains," and not pass out.¹

There are no fainting spells in today's text from Hebrews, even with all the references to Jesus' blood. The writer experiences no lightheadedness as he takes us into the presence of God. We enter the inner sanctuary, where Jesus does what's necessary in order for us to be restored to God. All our singing, praying, giving, and preaching are not our attempts to fix our relationship with the Lord. They're simply responses to what Christ has already done to fix the relationship between God and humanity.

This is why Hebrews focuses on the image of Jesus as our High Priest. In ancient Israel, priests were powerful people. They played a critical role as representatives of the people by carrying out daily worship, particularly the sacrifices that helped maintain the divine-human relationship. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest alone would go beyond the outer tent, into a second inner tent called the Holy of Holies, where he would take an offering for his own sins and the sins of the people, a "blood" sacrifice, an animal sacrifice.

Today's text reminds us that Jesus is our great high priest who has gone into the presence of God and placed an offering on the heavenly altar. He didn't offer the blood of bulls and goats. He offered his own blood. He offered his own life to God on our behalf, to make atonement, bringing us fully and finally into right relationship with God in a new covenant. In one respect, God used the same system he had used with his people for thousands of years. That is, a holy God and fallen humanity met through the offering of a life. But this time, it was the life of Jesus, God giving himself for us, in a once and for all offering, a sacrifice that would never need to be repeated.

One pastor tells about visiting a woman who was in the final stages of a battle with lung cancer. As she lay there in the hospital bed, gasping for breath, he could tell that the end of her struggle was near. In her hand she held a crucifix, the body of Christ nailed to the cross. Her grandmother had given it to her when she was a little girl. It had been carved

by a monk somewhere in Europe. As she held the crucifix in her hand each day, it was a reminder of her Catholic faith. Wanting to do whatever he could to help her, the pastor said, "Would you like for me to pray with you? Would you like for me to summon a priest for you?" Clutching the crucifix, she replied, "Thank you, but I already have a priest."²

You and I have a priest. The writer of Hebrews says, "... Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the old covenant" (v. 15). Through Christ's giving of himself for us, we have freedom. Freedom from sin. Freedom from the devil. Freedom from death. We can truly live, free, as children in the household of God, through faith in Christ.

But this freedom isn't a light and easy matter. In this household, this community where we share the benefits of Christ's priestly ministry with one another, loving one another is still hard, sacrificial work. It takes giving ourselves to one another, and to the world, in costly ways. Author Brené Brown once talked about coming back to church after years away and the moment "the whole Jesus thing" finally clicked. She said:

People would want love to be unicorns and rainbows. So then you send Jesus, and people say, "Oh my god, love is hard, love is sacrifice, love is trouble, love is rebellious."... Love isn't hearts and bows. It is very controversial. In order for forgiveness to really happen, something has to die. Whether it's your expectations of a person, or your idea about who you are. There has to be a death for forgiveness to happen. In all of these faith communities where forgiveness is easy, and love is easy, there's not enough blood on the floor to make sense of that.³

The hymns we sing, the Scriptures we read, the sermons that get preached and heard, the way that we go about life together, all remind us that God's love for us involves sacrifice. Our redemption, reconciliation, and restoration are costly. Jesus surrendered himself to the will of God. There's no avoiding the blood of Christ. The cross is always before us.

There was a third grader named Mark whose teacher had done a lesson on creative writing. As always, she told the story of the ant and the grasshopper. According to the teacher:

The ant works hard all summer and stores up plenty of food. But the grasshopper plays all summer and does no work.

Then winter comes. The grasshopper begins to starve because he has no food. So he begins to beg, "Please Mr. Ant, you have much food. Please let me eat, too." Then I said, "Boys and girls, your job is to write the ending to the story."

Mark's handling of the story was so surprising that the teacher called his mother and said:

Your son, Mark, raised his hand. "Teacher, may I draw a picture?"

"Well, yes, Mark, if you like, you may draw a picture. But first you must write the ending to the story."

As in all the years past, most of the students said the ant shared his food through the winter, and both the ant and the grasshopper lived. A few children wrote, "No, Mr. Grasshopper. You should have worked in the summer. Now, I have just enough food for myself." So the ant lived and the grasshopper died.

But your son ended the story in a way different from any other child, ever. He wrote, "So the ant gave all of his food to the grasshopper; the grasshopper lived through the winter. But the ant died."

And the picture? At the bottom of the page, Mark had drawn three crosses.⁴

Jesus' death gives us life. In one respect, this life is inward, as the self-sacrifice of Christ works on the place in you where you wrestle with guilt. Christ's offering of himself releases you and cleanses your conscience. Your heart, the very seat of your conduct and your relationships, becomes the location of transformation that only the blood of Christ can accomplish.

But the life given to you through the blood of Christ is also outward. Our cleansing is both internal and external. The cross works on us from the inside, so that, as our text says, "we may serve the living God" (v. 14). This is the language of worship. Christ's offering of himself to God was the ultimate act of worship, so that we may offer our whole selves to God. This is similar to what Paul urges in his letter to the Christians in Rome: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (12:1).

One of the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic is that it has kept us from gathering in-person to do what Christ's death has made it possible for us to do, namely, to worship the living God. True, when you can't be here you can still do that from where you are, with your lips and your lives. You can place your life on the altar, sacrificing your will to the will of God, moment by moment, day by day. But there's no substitute for the assembling of God's people, joining together to sing, pray, preach, and give. And on this day, to also break the bread and share the cup of the Lord's Supper with one another. The Lord's table is where we each take our place to remember how Jesus took upon himself the power and penalty of our sin, so that we could be free and live.

Walter Wangerin, Jr. wrote a book of reflections on the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In a meditation on Jesus' meal with his disciples, Wangerin says,

In the night when his people betrayed him—the night of intensest enmity—the dear Lord Jesus said, "This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many." Then! Can we comprehend the joining of two such extremes, the good, and the evil together? In the night of gravest human treachery he gave the gift of himself. And the giving has never ceased. The holy communion continues today.⁵

As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, Jesus' self-giving was a once and for all offering that accomplished what we could never accomplish. But the benefits and effects of Jesus' offering continue to meet us and work in us. The communion between our Lord and us continues. And so we continue to sing, in the words of another old hymn, "And can it be that I should gain / An interest in the Savior's blood? / Died He for me, who caused His pain? / For me, who Him to death pursued? / Amazing love! How can it be, / That Thou, my God, should die for me?"

¹ Ted Olsen, "There's Still Power in the Blood." *Christianity Today* website. March 31, 2015. Accessed February 10, 2021 < <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/april/theres-still-power-in-blood-of-christ.html>>.

² William H. Willimon, "You Need a Good Priest." *Preaching Today*. Audio cassette no. 106.

³ From William McDavid, Ethan Richardson, and David Zahl, *Law and Gospel: A Theology for Sinners (and Saints)* (Charlottesville: Mockingbird, 2015) 47.

⁴ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2001/january/12795.html>

⁵ Walter Wangerin, Jr. *Reliving the Passion: Meditations on the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Jesus as Recorded in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 55.