

“Power in the Blood”

Reading: Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 9:11-15

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I spent many years going to church before it occurred to me that something wasn't quite adding up in my understanding of what it meant to be a Christian. I understood that God loved me even though I was a sinner, He loved me even though I was a bad person who didn't deserve His love, and in fact He loved me so much that He sent His son Jesus to die for me so that I could have eternal life. I understood that that was what we as Christians teach and believe and live, and I believed that, but I eventually realized that I didn't have much of an idea of what that actually *meant*. I started wondering why it was that Jesus had to die, and why He had to die such a painful death, and even more than that, how was it that His death made a difference in my life? Why and how does the death of a man that I've never met who lived two thousand years ago on the other side of the planet make a difference in what my relationship with God is like?

It didn't add up to me, and it took me several more years of going to church before anyone helped me understand a little more of what happened when Jesus died. Nobody seemed all that interested in figuring out how the brutal execution of Jesus means that we can have eternal life and be free from our sins – we talked about the cross and we sang songs about how Jesus' blood saved us and we believed that His death made a difference, but we never talked about *how*. At best I would hear people say that Jesus died for my sins, and if I pushed it, sometimes people would say something like this: my sins hurt God and make Him angry, and because God is a God of justice, He has to punish sin, but Jesus took the punishment that I should have had. That never sat very well with me, because I wasn't sure I liked that sort of God very much, a God who is looking for people to punish, wanting to hurt people for hurting Him. Is God really so petty and so vindictive so easily offended that He would throw me into Hell to be tormented for all eternity just for, say, telling one lie to someone who isn't even God? And besides, how does that even make sense? How does punishing an innocent person for the things I've done wrong before I've even done them mean that I get off the hook?

We're going to spend the next few weeks looking at some ways of answering those questions. We preach and proclaim and serve a *crucified* Christ; we believe that His death on the cross somehow makes things right between us and God; somehow His death means that we can live forever in God's kingdom. But how it works is sometimes not so clear. How it is that Jesus' blood shed so long ago takes away my sin today and forever may be a question a lot of us have difficulty answering.

The great Christian author C.S. Lewis once wrote that Jesus' death on the cross is sort of like eating a meal: doctors and nutritionists have all sorts of theories and studies explaining what happens in the human body when a person eats a meal, and it may be that scientists have a very good understanding of vitamins and proteins and the things that make up our food, but you and I don't have to know any of that to know that if we are hungry and tired, we will feel better after eating a good meal. And long before anyone understood anything about carbohydrates and sugars, everyone knew that they needed to eat food to live. And so it is with Jesus' death on the cross: we don't necessarily need to study for years and understand the deep theology of the cross to know that it *works*. We don't have to read stacks of books to know that His death reconciles us to God; we don't have to know all the details of *how* before we feel its effects.

But even so, we are in the season of Lent, the time of the year when we prepare ourselves for Easter, when we celebrate that Jesus died and is risen. We are in the time of year when the cross is before us, leading us toward the path of suffering and shame that Jesus walked for our salvation, and so we will be spending these next few weeks talking about how the death of Christ makes us right with God. In order to get the fullest understanding of the cross that we can, we're going to be looking at it from several different angles. It's one cross and Christ died one death, but through the centuries Christians have explained the significance of His death in different ways, and so it will be as though we are looking at the cross through a prism: we will see it through one side of the prism one week, then we'll turn the prism to get another glimpse of it from another angle, and by looking at it several times from several perspectives we will try to get a view of the whole. There is no single explanation of the atonement that is the definitive explanation; though these are all different, they are all true at the same time. We don't fully understand how atonement works, in other words, so we do the best we can with some imperfect analogies.

One of the ways the authors of the different books of the Bible explain what Jesus did on the cross is by saying that He acted as a sacrifice on our behalf. Paul says in Romans 3 that God provided Christ Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement, which means that His actions made things right between us and God. And the author of Hebrews says something similar in chapter 9: the blood shed by Christ acted as a sacrifice, setting us free and cleansing us from sin so that we can enter into a new covenant with God. But what on earth does that actually mean? How does blood make us clean? How does killing someone restore our relationship with God?

As I said before, one way many Christians try to explain this is to say that we deserved punishment for the things we had done wrong, but because Jesus was our sacrifice, God punished Him instead of us. That's how justice works in our culture: if someone breaks the law, we punish them by putting them in jail, and when they have been thoroughly punished or made to feel sorry, then we consider their debt to society paid. It's as though we have an intangible credit account with society, and if you go into too much debt, you have to pay the penalty. So in some views of atonement, the thinking goes that our sins are so bad in God's eyes that they must be punished, and specifically, they must be punished through the shedding of blood. In order to save us, then, God provided Jesus as a substitute to give His blood and take our punishment.

But that's not actually how the Bible talks about the cross. Sacrifice really has very little to do with punishment. The concept of sacrifice is much more complicated with that; in fact there's a lot we don't understand about what they did. In the Old Testament system of sacrifices, people were made right with God by offering animal sacrifices, but it wasn't the punishment of the animals that made the difference; the animals weren't taking the punishment meant for the people – if the punishment is what mattered, the animals would have been made to suffer more before they died, and that's not what happened. And besides, some of the sacrifices were things like a bowl of barley, and as someone pointed out, you can't punish a bowl of barley. Jesus did not pay the penalty for our sins in the sense that we all have an outstanding credit card debt of a certain amount, and He suffered in exactly the right amount to pay off that debt. But that's not how sacrifice works, because in the Levitical system, the penalty you pay depends on your wealth: wealthy people might sacrifice a goat, and if you couldn't afford that, you'd sacrifice two doves, and if you couldn't afford that, you'd sacrifice a bowl of flour. The penalty was not absolute.

In a system of sacrifices, sin is not thought of as a list of things you've done wrong or an account of laws you've broken. It's not as though you've broken the rules this many times and therefore you have to receive such-and-such punishment in the appropriate measure. Instead, sin is like mud or filth or corruption that has built up and is interfering with your relationship with God. It's not just something you've done wrong, it's something that pervades all of us. All of creation has been cut off from God because of our rebellion against God, and so that sin has soaked into everything like pollution dumped into a lake. In other words, we are sinful people, which means that we have broken our relationship with God, and because we have cut ourselves off from God, we continue to do more things that make the relationship even more broken. And so, in the Old Testament, the way to restore that relationship was to offer a sacrifice: you ritually slaughtered an animal or burned some grain or poured out some wine as a way of demonstrating that you were committed to the relationship with God. There was nothing in the blood of an animal that somehow magically made things right; it's not as though the blood of the animal was a payment to God for your sins. What mattered was that a person came before God with something of value and offered that thing – consecrated that thing – entirely to God as a gift to show that that person was willing to do what it took for the relationship to be restored. Offering a sacrifice was a way of restoring the rightful order in the world and in a person's own relationship with God, making a covenant, an unbreakable promise, to once again be faithful to God.

So what does that sort of sacrifice have to do with a man being executed as a criminal in first century Jerusalem? Christians realized shortly after Jesus was crucified that this man was God in flesh, and His life and His death had served as a sacrifice to reconcile God and humanity. The crucifixion of Jesus wasn't a formal sacrifice like the ones we read about in the Old Testament; Jesus wasn't slaughtered on an altar by priests, He was murdered as a criminal by people like us who should have crowned Him king. He wasn't offered up to God by the people, He was sent by God the Father on our behalf because we couldn't help ourselves. But just like those old sacrifices, His life and death were gifts given without holding back as a demonstration of how willing God is to restore the relationship we broke. We could never restore the covenant on our own, we could never clear away the filth obstructing our relationship, and so it was up to God to rebuild that relationship with His people. Just like the blood of those bulls and sheep, His blood was the sign that God was making a covenant with humans, a new covenant in which God Himself would indwell His people and give them life from Himself. Like the father of the prodigal son, running across the fields to greet His lost son coming home, God is willing to hold nothing back to bring us back into His family.

Many Christians object to thinking of the death of Christ as a sacrifice because it seems so abusive and bloody, and how could a good God want something like that to happen? But we as a culture don't have very many rituals to mark important times in our lives, and as a result sometimes our relationships with other people can be unclear. If I hurt someone else and I want to restore our relationship, I would probably apologize to them and hope they accept it, and things might be awkward between us for a while until we rebuild our trust, and hopefully things will eventually return to normal. But in ancient times you could mark that time with a sacrifice: a sacrifice served as a concrete action you could take so that there was no ambiguity in the relationship, you were serious about being reconciled and the offended party was serious about accepting your desire to reconcile. It was a ritual that said in no uncertain terms that things were once again restored and right between the people involved; it wasn't just some abstract transaction that took place on some spiritual plane, it was a physical action that had very real impact on human relationships and human hearts. In much of

the ancient world, sacrifice was very normal. It doesn't speak as clearly to us today, but it definitely did for them then.

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross demonstrates to us how serious our sin is. It is not something to be toyed with or ignored or laughed at; it has very real consequences. But the sacrifice of Jesus also shows us how serious God is in reconciling us to Himself. This Lent, let us likewise take seriously the magnitude of our sin and the sacrifice of Christ.



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