Blood in the Bible

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Introduction.

A. In the English language, it is not uncommon for us to take concrete body parts and endow them with abstract meaning. The man in charge of a company isn't just its CEO; he is also its head. Among the many words that we expand in this way is blood. In a literal sense, blood is quite important. All of us have about six quarts of it, if I remember rightly, but although we possess it in such abundance, most of us don't want to see even a single drop of it. My brother, big strong ex-paratrooper that he is, gets woozy at the sight of his own blood.

B. In the abstract, though, references to blood flow much more freely. Someone who is entirely of Native American stock is pureblooded. An impetuous young man might be described as hot-blooded. We consider our siblings more important than our friends, so we say that blood is thicker than water. On the other hand, we might call a particularly ugly family argument a bloodbath. The list is nearly endless.

C. As rich as blood is in physical implications, it becomes even more important in the spiritual realm. Probably every hymnal in every church in the so-called Christian world contains at least one hymn about the blood of Jesus. Some in the denominational world believe that their faith calls them to refuse blood transfusions, even if they die as a result. When we confront this welter of religious images, we have two choices. We can press on through it without thinking about it, or we can try to understand what God wants us to see about the spiritual significance of blood, and for the true Christian, understanding is always better than ignorance. That's true in this area as well. Let's turn, then, to learning the importance of blood in the Bible.

I. Blood in the Old Testament.

A. To trace the significance of blood from the very beginning, of course, we must start by looking at blood in the Old Testament. We don't find blood first showing up in some minor passage in Leviticus; instead, God's commandments concerning blood are among the first recorded in Scripture. We see these commandments in Genesis 9:4-6. This passage emphasizes the powerful significance of blood and then makes two applications from it. As God tells Noah here, the life is in the blood, and throughout the Bible, those two terms are used equivalently. One passage might talk about how Jesus shed His blood, another, about how He gave His life, but they're really just saying the same thing. Blood is life, and that makes it a powerful, sacred thing.

B. On this basis, God commands Noah to do two things. In the first place, all humans everywhere are required to take the lifeblood of that which spills the lifeblood of man. If something kills a human being, it has to die. Blood requires blood. Second, though, because blood is this important, vital thing, mankind is commanded not to eat meat without draining the blood out first. That would be taking something of great spiritual significance and making it a common thing. It's making light of a subject that is literally a matter of life and death. This doesn't mean, obviously, that even a tiny speck of blood would be enough to render meat inedible. If that were the case, God might as well just have banned eating meat altogether and had done with it. However, the righteous of the day were to avoid eating blood as much as possible because it contained the life.

C. Genesis 6 told the ancients that blood was to be treated reverently and what it was not to be used for, but the Scripture goes on to describe two things that blood was supposed to be used for. The first of these is that blood was used to ratify covenants, whether between two men or between man and God. In our English translations, where the Scripture talks about someone "making" a covenant, the word "making" actually lacks the force of the original Hebrew. The Hebrew idiom is not "make a covenant;" it is "cut a covenant," and what was being cut was the throat of some poor animal. In the covenant that he makes with God in Genesis 15, Abraham goes so far as to hack his sacrifices completely in two. To the ancient peoples of the Middle East, the implication of this was clear. When they made a covenant with the blood of a slain animal, they were saying, "If I fail to keep this covenant, may I be killed and have my blood poured out just like this sacrifice."

D. The most important covenant ratified in this way in the Old Testament appears in Exodus 24:7-8. This is the covenant ratification for the entire Law of Moses. Moses has read to the children of Israel the book of the covenant, in which God promises that He will take Israel for His people and bless them if they accept Him as their God and obey Him. The people have the chance to accept this covenant or reject it, and they all choose to accept it. In response, Moses takes the blood from the sacrifices he offered a few verses earlier and sprinkles it on the people. This is a sign to them of how seriously they need to take this covenant. When the people don't obey God and defy Him in the wilderness, God responds in exactly the way that such a solemn covenant would dictate. He destroys them for their faithlessness to a promise that they made with blood.

E. However, the covenant made on Sinai differed in one important respect from the covenants that man made with man. Although disobedience in both cases demanded death, God set up a way in which His people could pay that price and still remain alive. Their sin, even though it violated the covenant, could be forgiven, and that forgiveness of sin was accomplished through blood, in this case, through the blood of animals. We see

God's own comments on the importance of blood in this process in Leviticus 17:10-11. Basically, the blood of the animal offered as a sacrifice was counted as the life of that animal, and the sinner offered that animal life in place of his own. We also see here a reiteration of the prohibition against eating blood. The life of the animal was such a sacred thing that anyone who consumed that life in Israel, whether a descendant of Jacob or a foreigner, was to be cut off, that is, he was to be put to death for using a sacred thing in a common way. Blood was serious business, and God expected His people to take it seriously.

F. As part of the covenant relationship between God and His people, from time to time, at momentous points in their history, the Israelites would pause to reaffirm their covenant with God. We see this most prominently in the beginning of the reign of Asa king of Judah in 2 Chronicles 15:10-12. The blood from those sacrifices was used to seal the covenant. Clearly, this wasn't a different covenant from the covenant that Israel had made with God at Sinai. The terms were still the same: God would protect them if they would serve Him. This was just a time when Israel's leaders, as commanded by God's prophet, renewed their commitment.

II. Blood in the New Testament.

A. When we take the Old Testament background into account, the description and use of blood in the New Testament makes much more sense. The same rules apply: the blood is still considered to contain the life of a living creature, and it is still used to seal covenants and to atone for sin. In that sense, the New Testament is just an evolution of the Old. However, this ancient symbolism was transformed by Christ when He applied it to Himself. We see the first revelation of this in Luke 22:20. For centuries, the words of God's prophets had foretold the time when the old covenant at Sinai, which had been so repeatedly broken by Israel, would be replaced by a new covenant. In this passage, Jesus announces that the time is at hand. This new covenant, however, would be consecrated not by the blood of animals, but by the lifeblood that He Himself would shed.

B. It's almost certain that the disciples of Jesus did not grasp the significance of His statement on that fateful evening, but to first-century Christians who had knowledge of the Law and leisure to reflect on it, this would have made a horrifying kind of sense. Even the blood of a bull or a goat could make a covenant binding. When Jesus shed His own divine blood to consecrate the covenant that He Himself had mediated, it created a bond that was literally indestructible. It was and is impossible for anything to be more solemn than such a weighty ceremony, and that is the covenant in which we share as Christians. It is worth noting that in Hebrews 10, one of the charges brought against Christians who fall away is that they have counted the blood of the covenant as an unclean thing. Brethren, God destroyed the Israelites for breaking a covenant made with animal blood. What can we expect if we reject a covenant made with the blood of Jesus?

C. Thankfully, however, within this covenant, God has also set up a way that we can have our sins forgiven. This, too, is through the blood of Jesus. The Hebrews writer explains in Hebrews 9:11-12. Notice the comparison that the writer sets up here between atonement under the old covenant and under the new covenant. Back then, when the blood of bulls and goats was used as an offering, that blood was insufficient to cleanse the worshiper completely of his sin. Instead, they were just a reminder of sin and had to be offered constantly. By contrast, though, the blood of Jesus is of such surpassing power that it is enough to wash away the sin of every person who has ever lived. It was a once and for all sacrifice, and it has the power to cleanse us today.

D. It's obvious, then, that even though few, if any, of us have ever seen a blood sacrifice, blood still plays a central role in our religious observance. Once we recognize that, it's hardly surprising that the ancient prohibition against consuming blood still applies to us. We see this in the words of the apostles in Acts 15:28-29. It is grouped, of course, with other things that Christians must avoid, like fornication, things strangled, and meat sacrificed to idols. We must understand these prohibitions generally, but what's interesting about them is that they all connect in some way to idolatry. For instance, when it comes to eating blood, that was an important part of the initiation ceremonies of the Roman god Mithras, who was the patron deity of the Roman legions. When someone wished to become a worshiper of Mithras, he would pay for the sacrifice of a bull, and he and the others there would eat its flesh and drink its blood. The ancient reason of the life being present in the blood also still applies, and we must avoid blood today for both reasons.

E. Just like the ancient Israelites did, though, God's people often stray from their covenant. We also are too often seduced by idols, not little statues in a shrine, but the material possessions and earthly pleasures that are worshiped by the ungodly around us. We also need to renew that covenant that we have made with the blood of Christ, and this is something that we do, along with many other things, when we partake of the Lord's Supper. Look at both the covenant language and the blood language in this very familiar passage, 1 Corinthians 11:25-28. All of us who are Christians have made a covenant that we can't back out of. We are bound to God by the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and if we go back on our word, God will find us guilty.

F. This morning, then, as we honor the commandment of God to eat of this holy meal, let's each one of us pause to renew our covenant with Him. Remember that feeling when first you were baptized, that your life had changed completely and you were now God's? That is the sense of ourselves that we should have all the time. We are God's holy people. Let's now renew that commitment and rededicate ourselves to His service.

Conclusion. If you have never made a covenant with God, now is the time to do so.