

By the Blood of Christ

M. W. Bassford, 11-30-14

This past week, Lauren and I took advantage of some openings in her schedule to head down to Missouri to spend a few days with my dad. While there, I spent quite a bit of time talking with my dad about the things we typically talk about: family, Mizzou sports, and most of all, the Bible. He mentioned that recently, he'd given a talk before the Lord's Supper, and in it, had highlighted a few of the things that the Bible says are accomplished by the blood of Jesus. I said to myself, "Aha! A sermon idea!"

Of course, there is far, far more to the topic than the content of a five-minute talk. It's fair to say, in fact, that the blood of Jesus defines our spiritual reality. Without it, we are lost and alone. With it, we are brought into communion with God and one another. Let's look, then, at the effects of the blood of Christ.

Sin and the Blood of Christ

First, let's consider the relationship between sin and the blood of Christ. It is by that blood that **FORGIVENESS** of our sins is possible. Consider the words of our Lord in Matthew 26:27-28. The language here is almost financial. Forgiveness occurs when one party incurs a debt to another, but the one who holds the debt chooses not to collect it. For instance, during the recent recession, when some people bought more house than they could afford and couldn't pay the mortgage, sometimes, the creditor would forgive part or all of the loan. The good news was that the former homeowner wasn't on the hook for the debt anymore; the bad news was that the IRS would tax him according to the value of the loan forgiven.

However, when it comes to forgiveness of sins by the blood of Christ, there are no asterisks or unpleasant surprises. Like those homeowners, we ran up a debt that was more than we could afford to pay. We incurred that debt by our sin, and the only way we could have paid it off ourselves was through our own deaths. Our blood was called for, but Jesus shed His blood instead. God is just, so God couldn't just write off our debt on His own and act like our sin never occurred. However, with the blood of Jesus, the justice of God is satisfied and He is free to forgive the debt that we owe Him.

The Scripture adopts a different metaphor when it says that the blood of Jesus offers us **CLEANSING** from sin. Look at Hebrews 9:13-14. The comparison here is between the offerings of the Law of Moses and the single offering of Christ on the cross. Under the Law, God demanded that His people take real physical bulls, goats, and heifers to a real, physical, tabernacle. There, the Israelites would watch as those animals were killed right next to them, bled out, and sometimes burned to ashes, right before their eyes. It was a graphic demonstration of the principle that sin required blood. Sin required death. Once those blood and ashes were sprinkled on the people, they had a fleshly sign that they had been cleansed from sin.

Under the new covenant, however, all of this has been spiritualized. None of us saw Christ suffer in the flesh. The tabernacle where He shed his blood wasn't on some hill in Palestine. Instead, He came with blood to the holy place of heaven itself. None of us have been literally sprinkled with His blood or smeared with His ashes. Instead, that blood was applied to our consciences, where it offers not a fleshly, ceremonial cleansing from sin, but a spiritual, actual cleansing, in which the very guilt of our sin is erased.

Similarly, the Bible teaches that we are **WASHED** clean of our sins by the blood of Jesus. Let's read together from Revelation 7:13-14. Although cleansing and washing seem like the same thing, they really represent two different spiritual concepts. As we've seen, cleansing is temple language. Washing isn't temple language. It's laundry language. In fact, there's an echo here of our modern crime dramas. We've all seen those cop shows where the detective is going around looking for evidence of blood splatter on the clothes of suspects. The presence of blood reveals guilt, and blood and guilt have been synonymous for millennia.

Fascinatingly, though, the blood of Jesus on the robes of the saints does not indicate guilt. It indicates precisely the opposite. Normal blood stains, but the blood of Christ doesn't stain. It removes the stains that are already there. It erases the guilt that already exists. So it is that a spiritual laundry detergent that is crimson can produce robes that are white, with the sins those stains indicate forgotten.

Finally, we see that the blood of Jesus offers **RELEASE** from sin. This idea is presented in Revelation 1:5. Those of you who are following along in the King James or New King James Version will see

“washed” here instead of “released” because that’s what the manuscripts on which they’re based say. The earlier manuscripts on which more modern translations are based, though, will say “released”.

This time, instead of sin being represented as a stain, it is being compared to bonds or shackles. If sin is a rope, then the blood of Jesus is a knife. If sin is a chain, then the blood of Jesus is a cold-chisel. It severs the connection between us and sin so that instead of being imprisoned, we are freed.

Sadly, many Christians fail to appreciate the significance of their release from sin. Even after they have been freed by Jesus’ blood, they continue to carry the guilt of those sins around with them. If we appreciate the scope of our freedom in Christ, that just doesn’t make any sense. It reminds me of a story I read years ago about training elephants. When an elephant is still a baby, the trainer will tether it with a strong rope attached to a peg. The baby elephant will strain to get free, but it won’t be able to. Eventually, it learns its lesson and stops the futile struggle. As the elephant grows larger, the trainer will continue to tether it with the same rope to the same peg each night. Eventually, the elephant reaches a size where it could easily snap the peg and escape, but it “knows” the rope is too strong, so it doesn’t make the effort.

In the same way, even though these Christians have been freed from their sins, they don’t act or think like they’ve been freed. They could leave those sins behind forever, but like that elephant, they act like they’re still enslaved to something that no longer has the power to control them. I won’t say that this is sinful, but it is certainly terribly sad. Let’s all resolve not to carry the sins from which Christ has freed us.

God and the Blood of Christ

The second extremely important relationship that the blood of Christ transforms is the relationship between us and God. God uses the blood of Christ to **PURCHASE** us to be His own. Read with me from Acts 20:28. The idea here—that we have been purchased by God and belong to Him—would be distasteful in any other contexts. Generally, we frown on the idea of one human being buying another. I’m sure there are a few crazies out there, but pretty much everybody in the modern-day United States agrees that slavery is wrong, that it is immoral to own another person. We still do, however, have trouble with what we often call “bought-and-paid-for” politicians, where wealthy individuals or groups contribute money to a politician’s campaign, or, more stealthily, to the politician himself, so that he’ll vote the way they want him to.

God’s purchase of us is both nobler and more profound. Part of our distaste for slavery, I think, comes from our recognition that one man shouldn’t have that kind of control over another, because if he does have that much control, he’ll abuse it and do evil things with it. God, by contrast, does not control us for His good. He controls us for ours and instructs us to make the choices that are truly best for us.

The control that He exerts, though, is deeper. There were countless millions of slaves in the old American South who obeyed their masters grudgingly and fought back against that control however they could. Their bodies were under the legal ownership of another, but their minds and spirits remained free. When God buys us, however, He doesn’t merely purchase our bodies. He owns our souls too, so that we must bring even every thought into subjection to Him. Because the price that was paid for us is so great, the control that it gives God over us is correspondingly great. Our entire being belongs to Him.

Our **REDEMPTION** is also possible only by the blood of Christ. We see this language appear in 1 Peter 1:18-19. This is another the-same-but-different description. Redemption is a lot like purchase, but instead of simply being buying, redemption is buying back. The comparison here is to the requirement under the Law of Moses that if an Israelite saw another Israelite enslaved, he was to redeem him. He was to try to get together the purchase price so that he could buy his countryman out of slavery and set him free.

Likewise for us. We aren’t exactly the brightest, so we sold ourselves into slavery to the devil for the paltry pleasure of some sin. Once the devil got us, he was determined to keep us, so much so that he set a redemption price on us beyond our power to pay. We are made in the image of God, after all, which makes us extremely valuable. God, though, was determined to buy us back, so He allowed the blood of His own Son to be shed as the price of our redemption. Now, we are freed and returned to His kingdom.

It is also true that the blood of Christ is responsible for our **JUSTIFICATION**. We learn this from Romans 5:8-9. Here too, we see yet another nuance of the saving work of the blood of Jesus. In the modern day, I think we see the concept of justification most often in a criminal and legal context, as with the legal doctrine of justifiable homicide. Normally, the United States justice system frowns on its citizens killing one another, but if you wake up one night to the sound of breaking glass and find a burglar climbing in through

your window, you are perfectly justified in shooting him dead. The circumstances of defending your own home justify or excuse what would otherwise be a criminal act.

In a spiritual sense, however, our own actions do not justify us. Because of our sins, if we must stand before God on our own merits, we do so without an excuse. Our justification, our excuse, our reason why we should not die, must be the blood of Christ. As the homeowner could say, “Yes, I shot the man, but he was breaking into my home,” so we can say, “Yes, I sinned, but Jesus shed His blood for me.” Because of that blood, we who would otherwise receive death from God receive life from Him instead.

Fourth, our relationship with God is transformed because we receive **SANCTIFICATION** from the blood of Jesus. The Hebrews writer discusses this in Hebrews 13:11-12. As I think most of us are aware, sanctification is the act of making something holy. “Holifying” isn’t a word, so we’re stuck with a loan-word from Latin. Often, we associate sanctification with cleansing, but that’s actually not quite right. Cleansing means taking something that has been contaminated and purifying it. Sanctifying is taking something that is common and dedicating it to God’s purposes instead.

Take, for instance, the bread on the table of the showbread in the tabernacle that we talked about last week. Physically, the showbread was just bread. Somebody baked it in an oven, and when it came out of the oven, though there wasn’t anything unclean about it, there wasn’t anything special about it either. However, when the priest took the bread into the Holy Place in the tabernacle and put it on the table, he offered it to God, and by that offering it became holy. Nobody could stroll into the Holy Place, tear off a hunk of showbread, and eat it. Now, that bread belonged to God.

We are sanctified not by a priestly ceremony, but by the blood of Jesus. When we come into contact with that blood when we are baptized, it marks us as belonging to God, as being dedicated to God, from that point forward. Christians are God’s special people. We are a holy people because of the blood of Christ.

Finally, we achieve **NEARNESS** with God by the blood of Christ. Consider Ephesians 2:13. The distance under discussion here, of course, is not physical distance, but spiritual distance. God is omnipresent, but at the same time, He is only near to the righteous. In this regard, the spiritual state of adults is very different from that of children. When Zoë, Marky, and I were praying before a meal the other day, the thought crossed my mind that my children don’t actually need to pray in the name of Jesus. They aren’t praying by His authority. They are praying by virtue of their own purity and sinlessness, and they can expect to be heard. This may be, in fact, what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 18 when He says that the angels of children constantly behold the face of the Father. That text may mean that children are continually in the spiritual presence of God. They have given Him no reason to banish them.

For we adults, however, the picture isn’t nearly so rosy. We have sinned, and because of that sin, God might as well be a million miles away. He is prevented by His very nature from having anything to do with us. There is nothing we can do to bridge this spiritual gulf, but it is bridged for us by the sacrifice of Jesus. In many ways, this point is a summary point for everything else that we’ve looked at in this section. In order for us to draw near to God, we had to be purchased, redeemed, justified, and sanctified first. Only then would we become people with whom God could associate.

Christ’s Blood as Christians

Everything we’ve looked at so far concerns what Christ’s blood does for us during our initial salvation. However, the blood of Jesus continues to be effective even after that event, so let’s consider too what it does for us as Christians. First, the blood of Christ gives us **CONFIDENCE** to enter the presence of God. This idea appears in Hebrews 10:19-22. I’m pretty sure that I’ve preached the bulk of a sermon on these few verses before, so there’s a lot here that I’m not going to talk about. Instead, I’m going to focus mainly on v. 19. This is a reference to prayer. In a spiritual sense, when we pray, we come into the throne room of God in heaven like a petitioner would come to the throne of a king in the bad old days.

Sadly, prayer is something that we often take for granted, but this should be a scary event. If the president of the United States were in Joliet, who of us would dare to elbow our way through the security cordon and start jabbering to him about what we wanted? If I were to approach the president at all, I would do so very slowly, very carefully, and with repeated appeals not to shoot! I would *not* have confidence! However, I’m sure that there are people who can approach the president with confidence. They’re his friends. They have nothing to fear from him or snipers with itchy trigger fingers, so they just march up.

If approaching a mere human being is such a fearsome thing, how much more fearsome it must be to approach the living God! A bullet can kill my body, but it can't destroy my soul. God, on the other hand, can condemn me to everlasting destruction with a single word. And yet, Christians have nothing to fear from coming into the presence of God, because the blood of Jesus identifies us as His friends.

Second, we have **CLEANSING** as Christians because of the blood of Christ. Read with me from 1 John 1:7. Now, the cynical among you might believe that I'm recycling sermon points to pad out a lesson. After all, we've seen cleansing this morning already. However, the cleansing back in Hebrews 9 is the cleansing we initially receive when first we come to the Lord. The cleansing in 1 John 1 is the cleansing we receive during our walk with Him. There are those who teach that as Christians, we should expect to reach the point where we don't sin anymore. This verse makes clear that the opposite is true. Even while we walk in the light, even while we are living as faithful disciples, we still need cleansing from sin because we continue to sin. This sin is occasional rather than our practice—otherwise we wouldn't actually be walking in the light—but it's still there. We should never expect to be clean on our own merits because of our righteous conduct. Instead, we owe our continuing purity to the same blood that saved us in the first place.

Third, our **FELLOWSHIP** with one another is by the blood of Christ. Consider 1 Corinthians 10:16. This is most specifically a reference to the Lord's Supper. We may not think about it often, but the Lord's Supper is a time of horizontal fellowship just as much as it is of vertical fellowship. It doesn't merely celebrate our unity with God. It celebrates our unity with one another.

Sadly, the news recently has been filled with reminders of all of the divisions of race and class that continue to exist in our physical nation. Those divisions have existed for hundreds of years, and they show no sign of going away anytime soon. In the face of all that mistrust and strife, the communion that we share as brothers and sisters in Christ becomes even more beautiful. It is so precious to me that in this building this morning, people who might otherwise be divided by their ages, their genders, their races, and their tax brackets are about to declare by sharing in the cup that their unity with each other is really what matters. This shouldn't be something that we assert and then forget about when we walk out the church-building doors. This should be the way we treat one another always, because our link in the blood of Jesus is that important.

It reminds me, in fact, of a story that Allen Malone, a brother who now lives in Tennessee, likes to tell. In years past, he made several missionary trips to Vietnam. Much like China, Vietnam does not allow foreign missionaries to proclaim the gospel, so Allen had to be clandestine in his contacts with the Christians there. It so happened that the Vietnamese authorities noticed that Allen had been spending a lot of time with one particular Christian, so they called both of them in to interrogate them.

They asked the Vietnamese man why Allan had been visiting him so much. He replied, "Allan is my brother." Now, Allan is about as white as a loaf of Wonder Bread, so this created some confusion among the Vietnamese police. They replied, "Really? This is your brother?" The Vietnamese Christian replied, "Yes. By blood." Of course, it was true. By the blood of Christ, we are more closely tied together than even the closest of fleshly brothers can possibly be.

Finally, we achieve **VICTORY** by the blood of Jesus. John makes this point in Revelation 12:10-11. As Christians, we have a lot of enemies. The earthly ones are bad enough: the atheist authorities in Vietnam who persecute Christians there, and even the people in our own nation who want to turn the United States into a country where everything is tolerated but the Bible.

However, those earthly foes are nothing when compared to our spiritual foes, Satan and death. The secret police can be outwitted, and hopefully the enemies of God in our country will never have enough power to carry out their agenda. Satan, on the other hand, succeeds in luring every one of us into sin. Every one of us will die physically unless the world ends first, and if we die in our sins, we will die forever too.

Those are not enemies we can overcome on our own. However, they are enemies we can overcome through the blood of the Lamb. By that power of that blood, we who deserve death will inherit eternal life.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's reflect on these things, on how much it means that Jesus shed His blood for us on the cross. Because of Him, everything that matters is different. Let's ask too, though, how we are using this precious gift. Are we living like blood-bought Christians, or are we living like the people around us, in ignorance and disregard of that sacrifice. Let's reflect as we partake.