

WASHED IN BLOOD



Hebrews 9:15-22
24th Message
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SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Two weeks ago we asked “Who can explore God’s strange design?” Charles Wesley asked this question in his hymn *And Can It Be?* which we sang that Sunday. At the center of God’s strange design is Jesus Christ, crucified, raised, and ascended on high. We affirm this in the Apostles’ Creed:

I believe...in Jesus Christ, [God’s] only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty...

Every statement there is surprising in one way or another. Each is an important element in God’s strange design. Each has an important role in Hebrews: Jesus’s incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and session at God’s right hand.

There is another element of strange design that forms the backdrop to this statement about Jesus. This is God’s choice of Israel to play an important role in his design. Earlier this week a little ditty popped into my mind, one that I hadn’t heard in many years: “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” Strictly speaking it is inappropriate to talk of the Jews until after the Babylonian exile, when it was the Judahites that went into Captivity. More broadly, the Israelites were the Chosen People. This was a great gift, though not all appreciated being the focus of God’s special attention. As Teyve says in *Fiddler on the Roof*: “I know, I know. We are your chosen people. But once in a while, can’t you choose someone else?” Why did God choose this people?

The Table of Nations (Gen 10) describes seventy nations, the descendants of Noah’s sons Shem, Ham and Japheth, who after the Flood spread out across the earth, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations. Among them was Abraham, living in Ur. Like all the other people and peoples, he served other gods; he was no different or better.

But the Lord called Abraham to leave everything behind: his clan, his land, his people, his gods. In the midst of all the other peoples he was to found a new people in a new land. A people and a home: this was the Lord’s promise. A people who would be the recipients of God’s blessing and conduit for that blessing to reach all peoples. The Lord called Abraham to live a different life, one lived in relation to the Lord. The Lord sealed this relationship with a covenant that bound them together.

Many centuries later God liberated this now-numerous people from slavery in Egypt. They were no better than other peoples. He brought them to Mount Sinai, to himself. He stated his purpose: “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” There at Sinai he entered into covenant with this people, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Exod 24:1-13).

The Book of Hebrews has described this as the first covenant. This covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary (9:1);

how to approach God and *where* to approach God. The tabernacle where God dwelt in the midst of his people, and a system of sacrifices mediated by priests to regularly purge the sanctuary of impurity so the holy God would remain there. If not, the impurities would build up, the sanctuary would become defiled, and God would remove his presence. This first covenant was a great gift, but it was provisional. There were things it could not accomplish.

It could not take away sins (10:4,11); the sins kept occurring and the impurities built up. The old covenant provided sin management not sin removal.

Secondly, the first covenant could not bring perfection; it could not bring humans to the final state that God intended for them. There are multiple statements of this in Hebrews: “If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood” (7:1), i.e. it couldn’t; “the law made nothing perfect” (7:19); the “sacrifices being offered were not able to clear [perfect] the conscience of the worshiper” (9:9); “the law...can never...make perfect those who draw near to worship” (10:1).

But Christ has offered himself, both offerer and offering, once and for all. He entered the true sanctuary, that is not part of this creation, because in his resurrection body he is part of the new creation. He entered with his lifeblood, the power of an indestructible life, which is able to “cleanse our consciences from dead works so that we can serve the living God” (9:14). This is where we reached two weeks ago.

Jesus, risen from the dead into the new creation, had attained perfection; he is now the complete human being. God has made “the pioneer of...salvation *perfect* through what he suffered” (2:10); “once made *perfect*, he became the source of eternal salvation for those who [heed] him” (5:9); he “has been made *perfect* forever” (7:28).

As we continue through Hebrews 9, this chapter that lies at the very heart of Hebrews, the preacher next presents the self-offering of Jesus against the backdrop of the old covenant. Jesus was a Jew, and his life, death, resurrection, and ascension were within the context of Israel’s story, a story that centered on the old covenant.

For this reason 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 first covenant. (Heb 9:15 NIV)

“For this reason” points us back to the previous paragraph, where the blood of Christ is far more effective than the blood of goats and calves. Because the blood of Christ is effective, he is the mediator of a new covenant, a superior covenant (8:6). A mediator may negotiate an agreement between two parties, or seek to reconcile two parties that are estranged. Christ reconciles God and his people, not under the old covenant which is broken, but under a new covenant. He can do this because he is fully human and fully divine. God and humanity are met in him. He, uniquely, can bring God and humanity together.

There is a purpose: “that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.” Inheritance is an important theme in Hebrews. Abraham “was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance... By faith he went to live in the land of promise” (11:8-9). Yet he did not attain the promised inheritance on this earth. He died without taking possession of that land.

The risen and ascended Christ has been appointed heir of all things, inheriting the superior name; he is enthroned at God’s right hand, in fulfillment of his promise to and covenant with David (1:2-4).

Those whom Christ calls his brothers and sisters (2:11) become partakers in the “heavenly calling” (3:1). We faithfully persevere in our journey towards the unshakeable kingdom, the new heavens and the new earth where we shall be fully in God’s presence, as Christ already is. This is the promise held out by the new covenant: God and his people dwelling together in a manner far beyond the first covenant. A people and a home. A permanent home, our inheritance.

There is a means to Christ becoming the mediator of this new covenant: “now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant” (NIV). A more literal translation is “because a death has taken place for redemption from the transgressions committed under the first covenant” (CSB).

A death has happened. Whose death? It is clear this must be the death of Christ. Death happened to him, as if he were completely passive. Why did Jesus die? Why did death happen to Christ? We can give several answers, some of them straight out of Hebrews, others from the Gospels. I will give eight.

Death happened to him in solidarity with mortal human beings. He shared in our humanity (2:14). He was made like us, fully human in every way (2:17), including our mortality. Charles Wesley’s hymn stated, “’Tis mystery all, th’ immortal dies.” The immortal, eternal Son of God, put on a mortal human body, and died. He lived a complete human life, from conception in Mary’s womb to death and burial. He knows what it is to be human, including the experience of death.

Secondly, death happened as a result of suffering. We talk of his Passion, meaning his suffering, beginning with his agony in the garden, ending in death and burial. He suffered when he was tempted or tested. He was tested in the wilderness, when he went forty days without food. He was tested on the cross: the suffering of death, that is, suffering unto death. He suffered in extremis, to the uttermost. The manner of death that happened to him was the most painful, humiliating, shameful, degrading death possible. He was tempted or tested in every way, yet he did not sin (4:16). He knows what it is to be tested and tempted; he knows what it is to suffer even unto death.

Both his humanity and his suffering are vital qualifications for his ongoing ministry as a merciful and faithful high priest who intercedes for us.

Third, death happened as a result of rejection by his own people. The Jewish leaders handed him over to the Roman authorities for crucifixion. There could be no stronger statement of rejection.

Fourth, he died as a covenant-breaker. The Jewish authorities charged him with blasphemy, for which the penalty was death under the first covenant. This covenant required obedience to the commandments. These commandments were good; they were the gift of order. God promised blessing for keeping the command-

ments, and warned of curses for breaking them. The ultimate covenant curses were death and exile. Jesus had lived a life of complete faithfulness, yet was condemned by his own people, God’s people, to die and to go into exile in Death. He died under the covenant curse.

Fifth, Jesus died as a substitute. Caiaphas said, “it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” The gospel-writer treats this as a prophecy “that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation” (John 11:51-52). Specifically, Jesus died in the place of Barabbas, who was to be crucified as a rebel or insurrectionist (Gk *lēstēs*).

Sixth, Jesus died, treated as an insurrectionist. When Jesus cleansed the temple, he accused the Jewish leaders of making it a “den of robbers (*lēstai*)” (Mark 11:17, quoting Jer 7:11). *Robber* is too weak a translation; the word means *rebel* or *insurrectionist*. The leaders were rebelling against God just as in the days of Jeremiah. When Jesus was arrested in the garden, he said “Is it as an insurrectionist (*lēstēs*) that you have come out armed to seize me” (Mark 14:48). He was crucified between two insurrectionists, and in place of another insurrectionist, Barabbas. So Jesus was numbered among the transgressors, among the rebels. Yet he was the only one faithful to God.

Seventh, Jesus died at the hands of the great power of the day. Crucifixion was a dramatic display of Roman authority and power. He was crushed, and the Romans and the Jewish leaders thought that was the end of it. The eternal Son had given up power, status, privilege in becoming human. Jesus could have called upon legions of angels, but he chose to continue the downward path of humiliation, powerlessness, weakness. He submitted as a lamb to the slaughter.

Eighth, death happened as the climax of evil. It seemed that evil had triumphed. But evil thereby exhausted itself. Having put God to death, there is nothing worse that evil can do.

For all these reasons death happened to Jesus. Some people add additional reasons: that Jesus had to pay a price or suffer a penalty for our sin, or that God laid our sins upon him. But I don’t find this within the Old Covenant framework within which his death occurs.

Theologians talk of Jesus’s *active* and *passive* obedience. His life was one of active obedience to God’s will. His suffering and death was passive obedience, drinking the cup which God had given him to drink, the cup which he had refused to decline in the garden of Gethsemane. Death happened to Jesus.

Jesus was faithful to God to the very end. He fully completed the role of obedient servant. He succeeded where Adam, where Israel had failed. So when death happened to him, Death had no claim on him. Death swallowed the only human who had no place in its realm. Could Death hold on to him? The supernatural world waited in suspense: the angelic beings wondered what would happen. One earth, the disciples had fled. The Jewish leaders rushed around to get the Romans to secure the tomb. The women, remarkably, were calm on that sabbath day (Luke 23:56b). The body of Jesus lay still, alone, in sabbath rest between the ages. On the first day of the week, Death had to give this body up. God raised Jesus into the new creation, in which the risen Christ now has the power of an indestructible life. The power of Death is broken.

A purpose or result is stated for this death: he “died as a ransom to set them free” (NIV), or “for redemption” (CSB). His death as a *ransom* suggests the payment of a price, but to whom was that paid? The word translated *ransom* is very similar to the word translated

redemption (9:12). It is unfortunate that NIV uses two different words. Most English versions are consistent: redemption (KJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV, CSB) or liberation (REB) in both places. In the Greek translations of Israel's scriptures these words are used for God's liberation of his people from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt so that they might serve the living God, whom to serve is perfect freedom. There was no payment of a price or a penalty. God acted to free his people; he liberated them. This has now happened with the death of Jesus. It liberates; it sets people free.

Looking back, Christ's death liberates from the transgressions, the willful sins committed under the first covenant (15). Looking ahead, his entrance into the true sanctuary, God's presence, obtains eternal redemption (12). In both cases his blood is somehow involved in this liberation.

As a result of his submission to death and his liberation from death, Christ has become the mediator of a new covenant. In this new covenant, in which one is reconciled to God, one receives the promised eternal inheritance. This promise goes all the way back to Abraham: the promise of a people and a home. The people are those whom the risen Christ is not ashamed to call his brothers and sisters (2:11). We are of the same family, united with Christ. We are partakers in the heavenly calling (3:1). Our home will be the inheritance, the heavenly Zion, the unshakeable city, where we shall enter fully into God's presence. Christ, our older brother, is already there.

All this is because death happened to Jesus, the one, true, faithful human being, the one, true, faithful Israel. He has been made perfect. He has fulfilled the human trajectory. He has fulfilled the Israel trajectory. His death has brought in the promised new covenant.

The preacher details the relationship between death and covenant:

¹⁶In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, ¹⁷because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. (9:16-17)

NIV and most other English versions use the word *will* in both verses, but this is the same word translated *covenant* elsewhere. There is considerable debate about these two verses, and who it is that has to die.

Most English versions assume this is about a *will*, which is what the Greek word does mean in secular use. This will goes into effect only on the death of the one making the will. It is assumed this must be the death of Jesus, as a result of which his followers receive the inheritance. But this isn't the way inheritance works in Hebrews. Jesus himself receives his inheritance. He is heir of all things (1:2); he enters into his inheritance at his ascension and session at God's right hand (1:4).

Others take the word to mean *covenant*, as in the rest of Hebrews, the NT, and the Greek OT. Some think this is about covenant in general. In some Biblical covenants an animal is killed. In the case God's covenant with Abraham, animals were cut in half to form an avenue, through which God passed in form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch (Gen 15:7-21). God's promise was a self-maledictory oath, meaning may he, the covenant-maker, be likewise treated if he break the covenant. Thus the death is of these animals and symbolically of the covenant-maker. But the First Covenant isn't inaugurated by this sort of ceremony.

A third option is to take this as referring specifically to the Old Covenant, which has been broken. This fits the context here in Hebrews which is all about the First Covenant. The covenant-makers,

now covenant-breakers, have brought upon themselves the covenant curse of death. It is necessary for this death to be borne, which it is by Christ, on whom is placed the covenant curse.

A fourth option is that it is necessary for the death of the covenant-maker to be offered, here specifically referring to Christ's offering of himself in full obedience unto death in order to inaugurate a new covenant. This new covenant is not yet in force while Jesus is alive; it comes into force only after death and his self-offering, first on the cross and then in the heavenly sanctuary.

Now I'm certainly not going to resolve all the issues with these two verses, nor is a sermon the appropriate place for that. Biblical scholars and theologians will continue to wrestle with this sentence. Suffice to say, the context is the old covenant which is broken, and there is a close association between the death of Jesus and the new covenant that replaces the first one.

The preacher next elaborates on the relationship between blood and the old covenant, the covenant mediated by Moses at Sinai:

¹⁸This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. ¹⁹When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. ²⁰He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep." ²¹In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. (9:18-21)

In our Scripture reading (Exod 24:1-13) we heard how the Old Covenant was enacted. Moses built an altar at the foot of Mt Sinai, where the people were assembled. He took the blood of sacrificial animals and threw half against the altar. He read the Book of the Covenant to the people, and they agreed to be obedient; they were confident that they could do all that God commanded. He threw the remaining blood on the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." There is a close association between the blood and the making of the covenant. The leaders then enjoyed a fellowship meal in God's presence. God and his people were now bound together, with the commandments as the basis.

The preacher broadens his horizon to include the consecration of the tabernacle and its furniture (21), the earthly sanctuary and the site of the regulations for worship.

There was a lot of blood. Blood for the inauguration of the covenant. Blood for the inauguration and consecration of the tabernacle and its altar. Blood for the ongoing sacrificial system. Blood was daubed on the horns of the altar, it was sprinkled on the atonement cover, it was thrown against the side of the altar of burnt offering, it was poured out at the base of the altar. All this blood represented life not death. Yes, an animal died, but the focus is not on the death of the animal. The death of an unblemished animal released its lifeblood. There was power in that lifeblood: power to cleanse.

So the preacher concludes:

In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (9:22)

The lifeblood of an unblemished sacrificial animal was a cleansing agent, a detergent removing impurity from the holy sanctuary. This was necessary so that the holy God would continue to live in their midst, and so that people who had become unclean could be released

from their state and restored to full participation in the community. Yes, the law required that nearly everything be cleansed with blood. There was power in that lifeblood.

Under the First Covenant, forgiveness followed that cleansing. There is a repeated refrain in Leviticus (10×) and Numbers (2×) when laypeople bring certain sacrifices for sin: the priest shall “atone” on his/their behalf, and it shall be forgiven him/them. The blood does not accomplish the forgiveness. The blood removes the uncleanness. Forgiveness follows as a gift.

It seems that the preacher has coined a word here: this is the first known use of the single word *shedding-of-blood*. He has combined two words that are used together in the Greek OT. We usually think of bloodshed as violence. It is occasionally used this way, notably in God’s statement to Noah after the Flood: “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed” (Gen 9:6).

But this is not how these words are used under the First Covenant. They refer to the pouring out of blood in the Levitical sacrificial rites. This is not the blood of violent death, but lifeblood that cleanses. Once that cleansing has happened, forgiveness is God’s gift.

Many think the shedding-of-blood looks ahead to Jesus’s violent, bloody death on the cross. But the parallel with the first covenant suggests the deployment of Jesus’s life-blood—living lifeblood which he carries into the true sanctuary in his living new resurrection body. He is very much alive with the power of an indestructible life.

The word translated *forgiveness* here has a broader meaning of *release*. Eleven times in the NT it is used with the word sins, meaning release from sins, that is forgiveness of sins. On its own the word is used in the Greek OT for the release on the Sabbatical Year, every seventh year, the year of release. Bond-slaves are released, debts are released, lent goods are released (Deut 15). It is a liberating reset for the entire community. The word is also used for the much greater release in the Year of Jubilee, every fiftieth year, after seven Sabbatical cycles (Lev 25). On the Day of Atonement in that year the trumpet was sounded and liberty proclaimed throughout the land.

This is what Jesus’s death accomplishes under the New Covenant: liberty, release from bondage and slavery into freedom. Jesus announced this at the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue in Nazareth. On the sabbath day the scroll was handed to him, he unrolled it, and read from Isaiah:

**The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim *freedom* for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed *free*,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)**

Freedom for the prisoners and the oppressed. Release from their captivity. Jesus sat down and said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21).

This is what the death of Jesus accomplishes by inaugurating a new covenant. He died, but death could not hold him captive. He was released from death into the new creation. He invites all, Jew and Gentile alike, to join him in death and resurrection. When we do so we are released from our bondage. We are transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. We are united to Christ. We participate in his resurrection life, the life of the new creation, the life of freedom. As we lean into this life we start learning how to walk to the beat of a different drum, how to live the Jesus way, how to live in the freedom of Christ. We present our whole selves to God as our spiritual worship. The Spirit sets to work, transforming us into the likeness of Christ. This is about so much more than sins forgiven. Yes, sins are forgiven, but there’s a much greater release as we enter into resurrection life.

We keep our eyes on Jesus, Christ before us. He is our forerunner who has finished his journey. He was released from death into new resurrection life, in which he has entered into God’s very presence. He keep our eyes fixed on him. And we walk together in this pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem. And we are cheered on by a great company of spectators, the faithful saints who have finished their journey and entered into God’s rest, into full liberation.

This passage begins and ends with *liberation* (15,22). In Christ God sets us free. Thanks be to God! As Charles Wesley wrote in another of his hymns:

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest clean;
his blood availed for me.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

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