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Genesis 9:1-4

30th Message

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POWER IN THE BLOOD

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

One of the benefits of listening to the radio while driving around is being exposed to new pieces of music. One of the more unusual pieces I first encountered this way is entitled *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* by the British minimalist composer Gavin Bryars. The core of this work is a 25-second snippet of song sung by a homeless tramp on the streets of London:

Jesus' blood never failed me yet, never failed me yet,
 Jesus' blood never failed me yet;
 This one thing I know, for he loves me so.

Bryars turned this recording into a loop, behind which he developed an orchestral backing. He was limited by technology: his first version, for LP, was 25 minutes. Cassette tape allowed him to extend it to 60 minutes, and CD to 75 minutes. Fortunately, perhaps, he stopped there, not writing a version for Blu-ray. In the CD version the loop must go around at least 150 times. Some people find this tedious, an example of the weakness of minimalist composition. But others find it a profoundly moving experience and are reduced to tears. It must have made an impact on the Christian band Jars of Clay because they included a short version on their album *Who We Are Instead* (2003).

The tramp on the streets of London was holding on to this simple truth: Jesus' blood never failed me yet. What is it about blood, especially the blood of Jesus? We sang this morning, "There is power, power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb." Most of our songs made reference to the blood of Jesus. Our call to worship (Rev 5:9-10, 12) exalted the Lamb as worthy of praise because of what his blood has accomplished. Today we will explore the power of the blood.

Our text is Genesis 9:1-7 in which the Lord speaks to Noah just after he has received his burnt offerings:

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

"But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being.

**"Whoever sheds human blood,
 by human beings shall their blood be shed;
 for in the image of God
 has God made humankind.**

As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it." (Gen 9:1-7 TNIV)

God has just wiped out nearly all life in the Flood. We might therefore think that he takes a low view of both life and the earth if he can treat them in this cavalier way. Not so: this passage reaffirms in several ways the high value which God places upon the earth and upon life.

God blessed Noah and his family, and said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." This is a verbatim repetition of his original blessing upon the humans when he first created them (1:28). He repeats this command at the end of the passage (9:7). In the Mesopotamian flood stories, the gods sent a flood upon the earth because of overpopulation: there were too many people and they were too noisy. Furthermore, the Mesopotamian creation accounts show that humans were created as an afterthought, in response to the complaints of the lesser gods that they were getting tired of their work. Humans were created to take over this grunt work. Such stories give a low view of human life. Humans have no dignity, except for the king who is special. Humans are little better than slave labor.

The Biblical creation and flood stories present a very different picture. The earth was deliberately and intentionally created by God as a dwelling place for life, both animal life and human life. Therefore, when God created the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, he saw that it was good: he wanted life. He blessed this life, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth" (1:22 ESV). When he made the land animals, he saw that it was good: he wanted life. When he created the humans he blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (1:28). At the end of the six days, he looked at all that he had made and it was very good: the sea, the sky and the land each filled with living creatures whom he commanded to be fruitful, to multiply and to fill their realms under his blessing.

The reason for the Flood was not overpopulation, not an excess of life upon earth. God wanted an earth filled with life. Humanity had multiplied upon the earth (6:1), as God intended. The problem was that this brought a multiplication of human evil upon the earth (6:5). God sent the Flood not because he had a low view of the earth and humanity, but because he had a high view of them. God had created the earth to be filled with life, especially with human life. But humanity had frustrated the purposes for which he had made it. He sent the Flood to wipe the earth clean, making it ready for a fresh start. He had Noah build an ark specifically in order to keep living creatures alive (6:20).

After the Flood God commanded Noah to bring out all the living creatures, the birds, the animals, and the creeping things, so that they could swarm over the earth and be fruitful and multiply (8:17). Now he expressed the same intentions for humans: "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." God intended that the earth be restocked with life. That's what he created the earth for, to be full of life.

The Genesis accounts may have some superficial similarities to the Mesopotamian ones, but the underlying values are fundamen-

tally different. The Genesis accounts of creation and the Flood show that God values life not trivializes it. All life is precious in his sight. We should have a similar attitude to both the earth and all living creatures.

The Flood might have wiped the earth clean, ready for a fresh start, but postdiluvian conditions are not quite the same as antediluvian. When God first blessed the humans, he told them to subdue the earth, and “Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (1:29). This rule is to be understood as a beneficial rule, acting as God’s steward over his creation. But this command is not repeated after the Flood. Instead, there is a changed relationship between humans and animals. The animals are described in four categories, each in their respective realms: the beasts of the earth, the birds of the sky, the things which creep on the ground, and the fish of the sea. God had created humans to rule over these creatures, but now the fear and terror of humans will be upon these living creatures. This terror must be understood as related to God’s giving of them all into human hands. What does it mean for the animals to be given into human hands? This is explained in the next verse: henceforth, every living moving creature will be food for mankind. Just as God originally gave humans vegetation for food (1:29), so now he allows them to eat animals from all four categories. It seems clear that we are to understand humans as being vegetarians prior to the Flood.

Though God now allowed humans to eat animals, it does not mean that the animals are without dignity. They are not to be trivialized. God added a strong exception clause: “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it” (9:4). The word here translated “but” is strongly emphatic, here expressing a restriction to the previous sentence. The verb “you must not eat” is a strong form of prohibition. So the clause is doubly emphatic. This is immediately followed by a second strong exception clause, beginning with the same emphatic adverb which TNIV tries to capture with “surely”: “And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting” (9:5).

God places these two strong restrictions back-to-back, one for animal lifeblood, the other for human lifeblood. For animals: meat with its lifeblood in it you must not eat. For humans: your lifeblood I will seek an accounting for. These two clauses about lifeblood form the hinge of the passage. Both draw a close connection between blood and life, whether for animals and for humans. Most English translations try to maintain this connection with the single word “lifeblood.”

I originally intended to cover both animal lifeblood and human lifeblood together, but the more I worked at this the more I realized that these are too big to condense into one message, so I’ll spread them over two. This week we’ll look at the value of animal lifeblood, next week at the value of human lifeblood.

Noah and his family were given permission to eat any animal, but were strongly forbidden from eating its blood. What’s the deal about the food and the blood? As always, we have to ask, “Why are we told this?”

Noah and his descendants are here given permission to eat any living creature, be it an animal on the earth, a bird in the sky, something that creeps along the ground, or a creature in the sea. But for Israel, for whom this document forms their story of origins, this universality was taken away by the Lord. Considerable attention is given in Israel’s law code, the Torah, to dietary laws: what Israel was allowed to eat and not allowed to eat. The rules are most fully set out

in Leviticus 11. Land animals were permissible for food only if they both have a cloven hoof and chew the cud. The camel chews the cud but doesn’t have a cloven hoof; the pig has a cloven hoof but doesn’t chew the cud. So neither was permissible as food. These non-permitted animals were unclean to Israel. Next, sea creatures were permissible for food only if they have both fins and scales. Carrion birds which feed on dead animals were forbidden. Winged insects were permissible only if they have jointed legs that enable them to hop, such as locusts, crickets and grasshoppers. Critters that swarm close to the ground, such as the mouse and the gecko, were all forbidden. The forbidden sea creatures, birds, insects and ground-huggers were not simply unclean to Israel; they were detestable. Elsewhere they are described as an abomination.

The list concludes,

“These are the regulations (*torah*) concerning animals, birds, every living thing that moves in the water and every creature that moves about on the ground. You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten.” (Lev 11:46-47)

The list is repeated in Deuteronomy 14 for the second generation as they are about to enter the land. This second list concludes with the command,

“Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.” (Deut 14:21; cf. Exod 23:19; 34:26)

Why did the Lord restrict Israel’s diet? It wasn’t because God was a spoil-sport about food. When it came to the meat of clean animals, God allowed his people to enjoy themselves.

“Nevertheless, you may slaughter your animals in any of your towns and eat as much of the meat as you want...according to the blessing the LORD your God gives you... When the LORD your God has enlarged your territory as he promised you, and you crave meat and say, “I would like some meat,” then you may eat as much of it as you want. If the place where the LORD your God chooses to put his Name is too far away from you, you may slaughter animals from the herds and flocks the LORD has given you, as I have commanded you, and in your own towns you may eat as much of them as you want.” (Deut 12:15, 20-21)

The availability of meat due to bountiful herds was a blessing from the Lord. Three times it is stated the Israelites could eat as much meat as they wanted, provided they had the herds and flocks. There is one reservation: they must not eat the blood.

“But you must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water... But be sure you do not eat the blood, because the blood is the life, and you must not eat the life with the meat. You must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water. Do not eat it, so that it may go well with you and your children after you, because you will be doing what is right in the eyes of the LORD.” (Deut 12:16, 23-25)

This prohibition on eating the blood is stated four times here, and reiterated in several other places in the Torah. So, again, what’s the big deal about the blood and about the classification of food into what may and may not be eaten?

Many Jews continue to follow these laws. They have developed a great body of regulations, the laws of *kashrut*, which determine whether something is kosher, meaning “fit” for eating. Creatures are ruled to be legitimate or illegitimate as food based upon the laws of the Torah. Animals that are permissible must be slaughtered by

a ritual butcher, the *shochet*, to ensure that, among other things, all the blood is drained out. A particularly large body of *kasbrut* law has developed around the prohibition on cooking a goat kid in its mother's milk. This has grown into a prohibition on eating meat and dairy products together. Kosher households must maintain two sets of plates, of cutlery, of pots and pans, one for meat, the other for dairy. They must not be mixed in the same dishwasher load, lest they mutually contaminate each other.

On one of the trips I led to Israel we were staying in a hotel in the Galilee, and had our dinners at the hotel. We were puzzled that some nights coffee was served with dinner, but other nights it was not. One evening when coffee was not available, one of our party went downstairs to the bar, bought a cup of coffee and brought it back to the dining room. No sooner had he sat down than one of the wait staff rushed up to him in a state of considerable agitation and told him that he couldn't bring his cup into the dining room. We were even more puzzled until the situation was explained. We had had meat for dinner, but his coffee cup belonged to the set of dairy dishes. If the cup went through the dishwashing process with the plates and cutlery used for meat they would contaminate each other. The dining room staff was so alarmed because such contamination would cost the hotel its kosher license and hurt its business.

Why were these rules given to Israel? Do they still apply today? Some have argued they were given for reasons of hygiene. But, if so, why was Noah allowed to eat everything? And what does this mean to me, as someone who has been grafted into Israel? Am I bound by these dietary laws? Am I allowed to eat pork or blood sausage?

God explained to Israel why he was imposing these regulations upon them: the separation of food into what may be eaten and what may not be eaten, and the prohibition on eating blood. The separation of food into permissible and non-permissible made Israel a distinct society, different from all other nations. The Lord explained,

“Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. But I said to you, “You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey.” I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations.

“You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground—those which I have set apart as unclean for you. You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.” (Lev 20:22-26)

The distinction between clean and unclean animals was solely to set Israel apart. They were to keep themselves distinct from the Canaanites by not offering child sacrifices to the Canaanite god Molech (20:1-5), by their sexual ethics (10-21), and by their diet (25).

In the days of Jesus the Pharisees took these food laws very seriously. They ate only with people like themselves whom they knew would keep the laws and maintain purity. They were scandalized by the company that Jesus kept at the dinner table.

Some years later Peter was on the rooftop of his house in Joppa, praying, when he received a vision. He saw a blanket descend from heaven:

It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

This happened three times. (Acts 10:12-16)

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of this vision, men sent by Cornelius the centurion arrived, asking that he come to their master's house. On arrival at Cornelius' house, Peter said,

“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean...I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right.” (Acts 10:28, 34-35)

After Peter proclaimed the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit came upon them and many were baptized. He stayed with them a few days, presumably sharing their meals. When Peter went up to Jerusalem the leaders criticized him, not that Gentiles had come to faith, but that he had eaten with them. Peter explained his vision and his visit to Cornelius.

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:18)

With that, 1400 years of Jewish dietary laws became irrelevant. They had served their purpose, distinguishing Israel from the other nations. This distinction had been only a temporary measure, pending the time when God would bring Jews and Gentiles together. But old ways died hard. Later Peter was in Antioch, the first Jewish-Gentile church. When representatives from the church in Jerusalem came to see what was happening, Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles out of fear (Gal 2:11); it seems that even Barnabas joined him.

The question of how Gentiles and Jews fit together in the church was not quickly resolved. There was so much dissension that the apostles met for a council in Jerusalem. Following the lead of James, they issued a letter to all the Gentile Christians,

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. (Acts 15:28-29)

The Gentiles were not under Jewish law, not under Torah. They did not have to become Jews now that they were followers of Jesus. Most particularly, the men did not have to be circumcised. Nevertheless, the apostles asked them to refrain from four things. This was probably a temporary measure to avoid offending the Jewish Christians.

The eating together of Jews and Gentiles was a powerful symbol of what God had done, bringing Jew and Gentile together into one body. Nowhere was this stronger than in sharing together the Lord's Supper.

The dietary laws concerning permissible and impermissible food were a temporary measure to keep Israel distinct until the time came for God to break down that distinction. Perhaps Israel should have known from the permission given to Noah that the ideal was the permissibility of all food.

But what about the blood? Here, too, God gave Israel an explanation:

“I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from their people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” (Lev 17:10-11)

The Israelites were to abstain from eating blood, because the blood was so powerful, powerful enough to make atonement. Blood was used to seal the covenant between God and his people. At Mt Sinai Moses wrote all the Lord’s words in the Book of the Covenant. Burnt offerings and peace offerings were sacrificed to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood from those animals and threw it against the altar. Then he read the Book. When the people expressed their commitment to obey, he threw the other half of the blood over the people and proclaimed,

“This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.” (Exod 24:6)

The blood had the power to seal the covenant. It also had the power to cleanse and to make atonement. As Hebrews states,

[T]he law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (Heb 9:22)

Israel’s sacrifices were a very bloody business. The blood of every animal offering was thrown against the altar or poured out at its base: burnt offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings. Moses consecrated Aaron and his sons as priests by putting blood from a sacrificial ram on the lobes of their right ears, on their right thumbs, and on their right big toes; he consecrated their garments by sprinkling with blood (Exod 29; Lev 8). Blood was used for the cleansing of those with leprous skin diseases (Lev 14:14, 25), and of a mildewed house (Lev 14:51). On the Day of Atonement the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies and there sprinkle blood on the mercy seat, the cover over the ark of the covenant (Lev 16:14) to make atonement for the Holy Place, then he would sprinkle blood on the altar in the courtyard to make atonement for it (16:18-19).

Blood, blood, blood. Israel’s tabernacle and later its temple were awash with blood. All because Israel was a sinful people which needed both cleansing and forgiveness. Blood had the power to accomplish both because God was pleased to accept the blood of an animal in place of human life. The blood of the animal was vicarious or substitutionary; it served in place of human life. Every time Israel offered an animal sacrifice the shed blood made it very clear that an animal had died in the place of humans. Every year at Passover Israel remembered that they had been protected from the angel of death in Egypt by the blood of the lamb.

Blood was part of the fabric of everyday life for Israel. Blood was powerful. Israel was not to misuse this power by eating the blood of animals. There was power in the blood, but the power was limited. The blood had to be offered again and again and again. Its fundamental weakness was that it lacked permanent efficacy. But now God has been pleased to accept the blood of one single sacrificial lamb, shed one single time, as permanently efficacious in providing cleansing and forgiveness. The book of Hebrews goes to considerable lengths to develop the immeasurably greater efficacy of the blood of Christ. For example,

Christ entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own... But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself... Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many. (Heb 9:24-28)

There is indeed power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb. It can accomplish what no blood of animals could ever accomplish. Jesus’ blood never failed me yet; this one thing I know, for he loves me so.

Now that the one fully-efficacious sacrifice has been offered and accepted there is no need for any further animal sacrifices, no need for any further pouring out of blood. The reservation of blood as an instrument of purification and atonement has been fulfilled. Therefore the prohibition on the consumption of blood no longer applies. The withholding of blood has served its purpose. You are free to eat black pudding and blood sausage.

Here in Genesis 9, Noah was given freedom to eat any animal, but with the emphatic restriction on not eating the blood. He had just offered up burnt offerings. Blood had been shed. The Lord had been pleased to accept the offerings as a fragrant aroma that put him at rest. The way was being prepared for a theology of the blood. Blood was precious; it was not to be belittled. Blood had power to accomplish great wonders. For Israel it temporarily atoned for their sin. How much greater power has the blood of the Lamb which permanently atones for our sin. Thanks be to God for the power he invests in the blood of the Lamb.

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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