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# FORGIVENESS THROUGH CHRIST'S BLOOD

Hebrews 9:15-22

By

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Hebrews Lesson 26

## Forgiveness Through Christ's Blood Hebrews 9:15-22

Since the time of Christ, people have stumbled over the doctrine that Christ had to shed His blood to atone for our sins. When Jesus announced to the twelve that He had to go to Jerusalem where He would suffer and die, the apostle Peter rebuked Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This should never happen to You!" (Matt. 16:21-22). The apostle Paul wrote, "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...." He went on to say, "but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:18, 23-24).

Liberal theologians hate the idea of Christ's blood paying for our sins. They have called such views "slaughterhouse religion." They ridicule Christians who believe in a God who would be petty enough to be angry over our sins, and pagan enough to be appeased by blood. The playwright, George Bernard Shaw, bitterly attacked the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, saying, "It is saturated with the ancient—and to me quite infernal—superstition of atonement by blood sacrifice, which I believe Christianity must completely get rid of, if it is to survive among thoughtful people" (cited in "Our Daily Bread," 8/79).

But from the start of human history, God has made it plain that forgiveness of sins is only possible through the shed blood of an acceptable substitute. When Adam and Eve sinned, they became aware of their own nakedness and sewed fig leaves together to try to cover their guilt and shame. But God did not accept their approach. Instead, He clothed the guilty couple with the skin of a slaughtered animal (Gen. 3:21). In so doing, God demonstrated in a graphic way the horrific penalty of sin, but also His great mercy in providing an acceptable substitute.

God no doubt explained to Adam and Eve and their children the type of sacrifices that He would accept. Abel obeyed God by bringing a sacrifice from his flock, but Cain presented to God an

offering from the fruit of the ground. God had regard for Abel's offering, but He had no regard for Cain's offering (Gen. 4:3-5). In anger, Cain murdered his brother. And in his pride and rebellion, Cain became the father of those who hate God's ordained way of forgiveness through the shedding of blood.

Pagan religions have always practiced appeasing the gods or spirits through blood sacrifices. Sometimes they have even gone so far as to offer human sacrifices, including their own children. But we would be mistaken to think that the Jews adopted their sacrificial system by copying the pagans. Rather, as John Calvin pointed out, "all the heathen sacrifices were corruptions, which had derived their origin from the institutions of God" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker reprint], on Heb. 9:16, p. 209).

Perhaps some in the Hebrew church had unbelieving Jewish friends who ridiculed them because they believed in a crucified Messiah. But the author is pointing out that the entire Jewish system of worship was based on blood sacrifices, and that God instituted that system to point ahead to the one all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ. To go back to the old system would be to return to a system that never could cleanse their consciences and to abandon the eternal redemption that God provided in Christ (9:12-14). In our text, he hammers home the point that...

Forgiveness of sins comes only through the blood of Christ.

In 9:15 he shows that because Christ offered His own blood as the sacrifice for our sins, He is the mediator of a new covenant (see 8:6). He focuses on God's promise of forgiveness of sins under the new covenant (8:12). He shows that Christ's death covered all of the sins of those who were called under the old covenant, so that they "may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance."

The mention of "inheritance" raises the idea of a will. There is some confusion in these verses because the same Greek word can be translated either "covenant" or "will" (or "testament"). In 9:15, 18, and 20, it should be translated "covenant." But in 9:16 and 17, it has reference to a will or last testament, stemming from the mention of inheritance (the NIV translates it this way). A will is only in effect *after* the death of the one who made the will. In a similar manner, Moses inaugurated the old covenant with blood in

accordance with God's command. But Jesus inaugurated the new covenant with His own blood. Thus our salvation (our inheritance) rests securely on the new covenant in Christ's blood, which is far better than the blood of animals. Consider three things:

1. Everyone needs forgiveness of sins because our sins have alienated us from God.

As I said last week, you can deny guilt and become hardened to the point that your conscience no longer bothers you, but if God is holy and if you have violated His holy standards, you stand legally guilty in His courtroom. So the main issue with guilt is not just guilty feelings, but actual forensic liability. If God condemns you in the day of judgment, your guilt becomes eternal. God's decreed final penalty for sin is eternal separation from Him in the lake of fire (called "the second death," Rev. 20:14).

Sinners usually deny their need for God's forgiveness by diminishing the holiness and justice of God and by magnifying their own goodness or merits. They wrongly think, "Surely God is love, and a loving God wouldn't send a good person like me to hell." But the Bible is clear that God is absolutely holy and just. He will punish all sin. His love does not mean that He sets aside His holiness or His justice. The Bible is also clear that we are far more sinful in God's presence than we ever imagined. We are born alienated from God because Adam's guilt was imputed to us. We quickly added our own sins to Adam's guilt! We incurred guilt by violating God's holy standards, both by our deeds and thoughts.

Being alienated from God, we need a *mediator* to reconcile us to Him. Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). "He is the mediator of a new covenant" (Heb. 9:15). If you have ever been involved in a legal dispute, a mediator may help the two sides come to a satisfactory agreement. He listens to the terms of both sides and tries to work out a solution. Christ knew God's absolute holiness. He also knew man's enormous debt of sin. He took on human flesh, lived in complete conformity to God's holy standards, and then offered Himself as the price of redemption that God's justice demands. In so doing, He brought both sides together (see 2 Cor. 5:18-21).

Sometimes people wonder how those who lived before Christ were saved. The answer is, they were saved in the same way that we are saved, through faith in the shed blood of Christ. The sacrifices that they offered symbolized or pictured the sacrifice of Christ who would offer Himself as their substitute. Isaiah (53:5-6, 11) wrote,

But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.... As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.

Thus the Old Testament sacrifices postponed the penalty for sins until Christ paid for them at the cross. The salvation of the saints before Christ was, so to speak, on credit, until Christ paid the bill. Paul says the same thing in Romans 3:23-26,

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, / say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The fact that everyone is a sinner in need of God's forgiveness means that you can offer the gospel to every person knowing that it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes. You may feel intimidated because the person you're talking to is highly educated and intelligent. He may launch off into philosophy or science to try to prove that there is no God. Don't be threatened. Just keep in mind that this guy is a sinner who is going to die and stand before a holy God. He needs a mediator to reconcile him to God before that day. Jesus Christ is the only such mediator. His shed blood is the price of redemption for sinners who trust in Him.

2. God's uniform method for the forgiveness of sins has been the shedding of blood.

God decreed that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). In Leviticus 17:11, God explains why blood must be shed: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.” God’s justice demands the payment of the penalty, which is death. In His mercy, He will accept the death of an acceptable substitute in place of the death of the sinner. The system of animal sacrifices under the old covenant pictured and pointed ahead to Christ, the lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Note three things:

A. Sin leads to physical and spiritual death.

God told Adam and Eve that in the day that they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would surely die (Gen. 2:17). But they ate of the fruit and did not drop dead that day. Why not? At the moment that they ate of the fruit, they died spiritually. Previously, they had enjoyed intimate fellowship with God, with no barriers between them. But instantly they were alienated from Him and tried to hide themselves from His holy presence.

On that same day, the process of physical death set in. Although in God’s providence and purpose, those early humans lived for hundreds of years, they all died. Their bodies became subject to aging and disease. Sin resulted in death through murder and war. All of the ugly horrors of the world, whether the ravages of disease, the atrocities of crime, terrorism, and war, or the environmental devastation of the world’s resources, are the result of sin.

When I have read stories about missionaries going into savage tribes with the gospel, I have marveled that these tribes had not annihilated themselves centuries before. Their histories are one long account of one tribe wronging the other tribe, and then that tribe taking revenge in brutal ways. Then the other tribe retaliates and the cycle goes on and on. The same thing is true, however, in more “civilized” parts of the world. The entire history of the world is a history of battles over territory or resources. Proud men lord it over other proud men, until they are overthrown. Sin is at the root of all of the physical death in the world. And sin results in every person being spiritually dead, alienated from the life of God.

B. Blood graphically pictures the costliness of sin.

The word "blood" occurs six times in verses 18-22, plus "death" or "dead" three times in verses 15-17. Have you ever thought about how gory and messy the Jewish religion was? Everything was sprinkled with blood. The priests slaughtered dozens and sometimes hundreds or thousands of animals at the altar. They took bowls full of blood and sprinkled it on the altar. The carcasses were burned on the altar, so that the smell would have been constant and overwhelming. I've never seen the slaughter of a bull or sheep or goat. I buy my meat pre-cut and shrink-wrapped in cellophane at the grocery store. To be transported back in time and witness the sacrifices at the tabernacle would be a shocking experience for most of us. The blood graphically pictured the cost of sin.

- C. The old covenant was inaugurated with blood, because death is God's decreed penalty for sin.

The author mentions details in 9:19 that are not included in the account in Exodus 24. There is no mention there of goats, water, scarlet wool, hyssop, or the sprinkling of the book. Other texts mention some of these things in other rituals (Lev. 1:10; 14:4-6; Num. 19:6, 18). Either the author is collectively gathering up all of these rituals into one, since he is dealing with the general subject of all things in the Old Testament being cleansed by blood (so Calvin and John Owen). Or, he may be relying on oral tradition, with which all of the Jews were familiar. But, his point is, "according to the Law, *one may almost say*, all things are cleansed with blood" (9:22). The exception was that a poor man could offer a grain offering instead of an animal sacrifice (Lev. 5:11-13). But the exception did not negate the rule, that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." God was making the point that death is His decreed penalty for our sins.

Thus every person needs forgiveness of sins. God's uniform method for the forgiveness of sins has been the shedding of blood.

3. The death of Jesus inaugurated the new covenant with blood.

Jesus' blood, of course, is a figure of speech referring to His death. While Jesus' physical sufferings were bloody and awful, it was what He went through spiritually that redeemed us from the curse of the Law. As Paul put it, "He made Him who knew no sin

to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ's worst agony on the cross was to be separated from the Father as He bore our punishment.

In 9:16-17, the author uses the analogy of a last will and testament to show that forgiveness comes to us as heirs of Christ and that forgiveness comes to us through His blood.

A. Forgiveness comes to us as heirs of Christ.

To receive an inheritance, you have to be included in the will, and the person making the will must die. Those whom God calls (9:15) are the heirs. The emphasis here is not on men calling upon God, but on God's calling of men. In other words, He is the owner of the estate, and He makes up the will, choosing the heirs. He has a specific list, not a sign-up sheet. But once the will has been drawn up, it is not put into effect until the death of the testator.

We all know this principle. Ray Stedman (*What More Can God Say?* [G/L Regal], p. 139) tells how he was at a meeting with a group of people where the director of a Christian conference center was explaining the procedures for securing additional properties to expand the ministry. He described an arrangement that the center had with a widow, where they paid her an annuity until her death, and on her death her property would be deeded over to the conference center. One man immediately raised his hand and facetiously asked, "How healthy is she?" The question was in bad taste, but it illustrates the truth that wills are of no value to the beneficiaries until the death of the testator.

So the question you need to answer is, "Have you heard God's call in the gospel and responded with faith in Jesus' death?" He died to inaugurate the benefits of the will for the heirs. If you are an heir of Christ through faith in His blood, you have the benefit of forgiveness that His death secured.

B. Forgiveness comes only through the blood of Christ.

If there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood, then the opposite is also true: with the shedding of blood, there is forgiveness! As we saw from 9:9, these Old Testament sacrifices could not make the worshiper perfect in conscience. They sanctified for the cleansing of the flesh, but "how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without

blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (9:13-14)!

We would not associate sprinkling blood on things as cleansing them (9:13, 22), but rather, as staining them. If you've ever gotten blood on a nice shirt, you know that you need to rinse it out quickly or it will permanently stain your shirt. To think of taking blood and sprinkling the book, the people, the tabernacle, and all the sacred vessels seems like it would dirty them, not cleanse them.

But modern medicine (of which the ancient Hebrews had no clue) has revealed how accurate it is to speak of the cleansing property of blood. Dr. Paul Brand, who specialized in the treatment of leprosy, wrote (with Philip Yancey, *Christianity Today* [2/18/83], p. 13) about how the blood is designed to cleanse the body of toxins and wastes that are built up in the tissues:

No cell lies more than a hair's breadth from a blood capillary, lest poisonous by-products pile up.... Through a basic chemical process of gas diffusion and transfer, individual red blood cells, traveling slowly inside narrow capillaries, simultaneously release their cargoes of fresh oxygen and absorb waste products (carbon dioxide, urea, and uric acid). The red cells deliver these potentially hazardous chemicals to organs that can dump them outside the body.

He goes on to tell how the lungs and kidneys, plus the liver and spleen, work to cleanse the blood of these poisons to keep our system cleansed and healthy. Each red blood cell can only sustain the sequence of loading and unloading these chemicals for about a quarter million circuits. Then they are broken down and recycled by the liver, while the bone marrow releases new red cells to continue the process (about four million cells per second!).

God designed this as a beautiful picture to show that just as blood cleanses our bodies from poisons, so the blood of Christ, applied to our hearts by faith, cleanses our souls from the poison of sin. Regarding the spiritual cleansing that we need, someone wrote, "The blood of animals cannot cleanse from sin because it is non-moral. The blood of sinning man cannot cleanse because it is immoral. The blood of Christ itself alone can cleanse because it is moral" (cited by W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Hebrews: A Devotional*

*Commentary* [Eerdmans] pp. 117-118). The blood of Christ was shed to provide the cleansing from sin and forgiveness that we all need. Have you applied it to your soul? It is God's only way for forgiveness of sins.

### Conclusion

A legend says that during a serious illness, the devil came into Martin Luther's sick room, looked at him with a triumphant smile, and unrolled a big scroll, which unwound by itself. Luther read from the scroll the long, fearful record of his own sins, one by one. At first, he reeled in despair.

But then, suddenly, Luther cried out, "One thing you have forgotten. The rest is all true, but one thing you left out: 'The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin'" As Luther said this, the accuser of the brethren and his long scroll disappeared (Paul Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations* [Assurance Publishers], # 480).

Luther also said (cited by R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* [Augsburg Publishing House], p. 130),

Sin has but two places where it may be; either it may be with you, so that it lies upon your neck, or upon Christ, the Lamb of God. If now it lies upon your neck, you are lost; if, however, it lies upon Christ, you are free and will be saved. Take now whichever you prefer.

Forgiveness of your sins comes only through the blood of Jesus Christ. Make sure that you have applied His blood to your heart by faith!

### Discussion Questions

1. Why is the substitutionary atonement of Christ an essential doctrine of the Christian faith?
2. Why is there no cleansing from sin apart from Christ's blood?
3. How would you counsel a person who says that he has trusted in Christ, but he still feels guilty over his past sins?
4. Someone asks, "Why can't God just say, 'I forgive you'? Why the need for blood?" Your response?

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