

Title: Nothing but the Blood
Text: Various
Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron
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I have a confession to make. I can be a little bit squeamish at the sight of blood. I have learned to look the other way when, every six months, a nurse draws blood from my arm for a series of tests. I don't want to suffer the shame of fainting in the surgery. My squeamishness at the sight of blood is relatively mild. Others suffer far greater from hemophobia – or an irrational fear of blood. At the sight, or even the thought of blood, hemophobics can demonstrate a series of symptoms like sweating, shaking, heart palpitations and the inability to speak or think clearly.

In managing their fear, hemophobics will do everything they can to avoid the sight or even the thought of blood.

Good Friday could be easily titled Bloody Friday. On Good Friday we remember, celebrate even, the central place a blood-soaked Cross stands in the Christian faith.

Good Friday is Bloody Friday.

The night before he was betrayed, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples and after they had finished their food he took up a cup and told them that the wine in it represented the blood he would shed to establish a new covenant.

Later that night as he prayed while the disciples slept, Luke tells us that such was his anguish; Jesus' sweat fell on the ground like drops of blood.

Matthew tells us that when Judas betrayed his master, he betrayed innocent blood.

When Pilate can sustain no charge against Jesus, he washes his hands of Jesus' blood.

After he is taken away, Jesus is beaten and whipped and his blood spills onto the stone pavement of the Tower of Antonius.

A crown of thorns is placed on Jesus' head and blood slowly oozes down his brow.

Jesus is nailed hand and foot to a cross, hoisted into the air and as blood seeps from his wounds, his heart slowly stops circulating the blood necessary for life.

As Jesus' died, one of his executioners pierced Jesus' side and a mixture of blood and water spilled out.

After it was all over, it was Jesus' blood soaked corpse that was taken down from the cross, wrapped in white linen and placed in a sealed tomb.

Good Friday is Bloody Friday.

It is easy for us to suffer from a form of spiritual hemophobia – an irrational fear, or avoidance of the central claim of the Christian faith that it is through the shed blood of Jesus that we receive life. We want to rush past the blood-soaked story of Good Friday to the power-filled wonder of Easter Sunday. Good Friday language of sacrifice and torture and crucifixion and blood seems all so very medieval, inhuman and barbaric – superstitious even. But the resurrection hope of Easter Sunday makes no sense without the blood-soaked sacrifice of Good Friday.

Here is the interesting thing. The most common means by which the Bible refers to the death of Jesus is not the Cross, but the shed blood of Jesus. In fact, the New Testament mentions blood 92 times, nearly always in reference to the sacrificial death of Jesus on Bloody Friday.

There is an old gospel song I used to sing when I was younger. Some of you will know it. It goes like this:

There is pow'r, pow'r,
wonder working pow'r
In the blood
of the Lamb;
There is pow'r, pow'r,
wonder working pow'r
In the precious
blood of the Lamb.

For the next few moments I want to speak of the wonder working power of Jesus' blood.

You see, Jesus is our scapegoat, our Passover lamb and our scarlet worm.

Jesus our Scapegoat

In ancient cultures, including ancient Hebrew culture, blood was synonymous with life. Even though ancient people did not have the scientific knowledge we have, people intuitively knew that blood was sacred – that it was essential to life. The spilling of blood led to the loss of life. And so when Cain kills Abel, it is his spilled blood – his life - that cries out from the ground.

Earlier in the story, Cain and Abel's parents Adam and Eve committed the first sin by turning their back on God. Immediately they felt shame and guilt and tried to hide from God. But God knew and saw. God was gracious to Adam and Eve and in that even though they deserved to die, instead covered over the nakedness of their shame and guilt:

The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.
(Genesis 3:21)

The innocent blood of animals was spilled in order to cover the shame and guilt of humankind's sin. An innocent life was sacrificed and substituted for a guilty life. From this point on, blood sacrifices became the standard way the worship God.

After the flood, Noah built an altar and made burnt offerings to God.

After God calls him, Abram built an altar and made sacrifices to God.

This was the tradition of ancient Hebrew culture and indeed it seems all ancient cultures. Animals would be sacrificed; innocent blood would be spilled in an attempt to lift the curse of sin off a person or group of people.

In ancient Israel, an elaborate sacrificial system developed over centuries to the point where eventually there eleven different sacrifices that came under four main headings – burnt offerings, sin offerings, peace offerings and guilt offerings. Sacrifices were made in the morning and evening on every day of the year. Every year, hundreds of thousands of goats, lambs, birds and other animals would be sacrificed. Thousands of priests were employed to make sacrifices on behalf of the people. In ancient Israel, sacrifice always involved blood. The temple pavement was stained with the blood of sacrifice.

The holiest day in the Jewish calendar was Yom Kippur – or the Day of Atonement. It was so important it was often referred to as 'The Day.' On this day the High Priest would select two healthy goats – representing sinless perfection. The first goat would be slaughtered by the high priest and its blood sprinkled on the mercy seat inside the holy of holies, the heart of the temple, where only the High priest could enter on one day – the Day of Atonement. The blood of the innocent goat was offered as a substitute for the guilty blood of the people of Israel.

After this, the High Priest would take the second goat – the scapegoat – place his hands on its head and pray over it, confessing the sins of the people. The scapegoat would then be taken outside the city and cast out into the wilderness where it would day – symbolically taking with it the sins of the people. Jewish tradition around the time of Jesus lead to the

practice of tying a scarlet ribbon to the scapegoat before releasing it. The understanding was that when the scarlet ribbon turned white this signified that God has accepted Israel's atonement offerings and that their sins were forgiven.

After his arrest and trial, the bible tells us that Jesus was marched outside the city walls. This was so that the shame of his crucifixion would not defile the holy city or the temple. Hebrews says:

And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.
(Hebrews 13:12)

Jesus shed his blood outside the city walls as our scapegoat – the one on whom the burden of sins was placed.

Through Isaiah, God promised a day when:

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool.
(Isaiah 1:18)

Jesus is our scapegoat though through whose blood we are made clean.

Jesus our Passover Lamb

For Israel the practice of sacrifice took on perhaps most significant meaning in the story of Passover. For generations Israel had lived in slavery in Egypt. God sent Moses to lead them out of bondage, but Pharaoh was reluctant to let them go. Through Moses, God repeatedly asks Pharaoh to let his people go. And repeatedly Pharaoh refuses. As a result God sends plagues on to Egypt – frogs, gnats, flies, boils, hail, locusts – and still Pharaoh refuses to relent.

The final plague is death itself. On one terrible night death visited every household in Egypt taking the life of every first born son. Death visits every Egyptian household without exception, but passes over every Israelite household without exception. Why? God prepared Israel for this terrible night by giving them some very specific instructions. He commanded every household to slaughter a one year old lamb that is without blemish, for the family to eat it, but also to sprinkle some of its blood on the door posts of their home. Seeing the innocent blood of a lamb on the door posts of every Israelite household, God's judgement passed over them and so the life of their first born sons was spared. God accepted the sacrifice – the blood - of an innocent substitute.

The last and most terrible plague of death convinced Pharaoh to let Israel go. Straight after Passover night, as Egypt descends into overwhelming grief, Israel packs up and leaves behind its slavery. Through Passover, God delivered Israel from bondage and rescued them from death. An innocent lamb dies so that God's people can live.

Just as he begins his ministry, his cousin John the Baptist sees Jesus coming towards him and says:

Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
(John 1:29)

John prophesied the events that would take place three years later during the Passover. Jesus and his disciples shared a Passover meal together. They ate the specially prepared lamb, they recited the prayers of their tradition and they remembered and celebrated how centuries before through the blood of innocent and perfect lambs God has delivered them from death and bondage and slavery.

After they had finished eating, Jesus picked up a wine cup, offered it to all his friends and said:

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.
(Matthew 26:28)

In that final meal with his disciples, Jesus was clearly identifying his innocent life with the innocent life of the Passover lamb. He was identifying the sacrifice he would make the next day with the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. He was identifying his blood with the blood of the Passover lamb.

Peter says this:

(You were redeemed) with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.
(1 Peter 1:19)

Jesus is our Passover Lamb through whose blood rescues us from sin and slavery and death.

Ravi Zacharias reminds us of the terrible day in November, 2008, when a gang of terrorists stormed a luxury hotel in Mumbai, India. After the carnage had left 200 people dead, a reporter interviewed a guest who had been at the hotel for dinner that night. The guest described how he and his friends were eating dinner when they heard gunshots. Someone grabbed him and pulled him under the table. The assassins came striding through the restaurant, shooting at will, until everyone (or so they thought) had been killed. Miraculously, this man survived. When the interviewer asked the guest how he lived when everyone else at his table had been killed, he replied, "I suppose because I was covered in someone else's blood, and they took me for dead."

Those who trust their life to Jesus as Lord and Savior receive a spiritual covering. Spiritually we are covered by the blood of Jesus – and through that covering we received rescue and redemption and protection and life.

Jesus our Scarlet Worm

Soon after Jesus is betrayed by Judas and later he is arrested. The next day he endures a sham trial, brutal beatings, ridicule and hatred from the crowd and finally his battered body is hoisted up on a Cross.

The gospel writers are very careful to record for us the words that Jesus painfully gasps out as he dies on the Cross. Perhaps the most famous, poignant and disturbing is when Jesus cries out:

“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
(Matthew 27:46)

These are no random words. They are words full of meaning that Jesus said with clear intent. Those who heard him would have known this was a cry of David from Psalm 22 – a psalm that came to be seen as prophesying the suffering death of Jesus.

Psalm 22 opens with the cry, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

In directly quoting the opening line of Psalm 22 as he died on the Cross we have come to understand the whole of this psalm of David to be a messianic prophecy of Jesus’ suffering death.

And so few verses into Psalm 22 we read this:

But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people.
(Psalms 22:6)

There are obvious parallels with the way in which Jesus died. Betrayed by his friends and mocked by the crowds – Jesus was virtually alone as he died.

Here is the interesting thing. The Hebrew word that is translated as worm is *towla*. The *towla* was not just any worm, but a particular worm that is found in Palestine and we know by its Latin name ‘*coccus ilicis*.’ Its more common name was and is the Scarlet Worm.

When a female scarlet worm was ready to give birth to her young, she would attach her body to the trunk of a tree, fixing herself so firmly and permanently that she would never leave again. The eggs deposited beneath her body were thus protected until the larvae were hatched and able to enter their own life cycle.

When the mother inevitably died, a crimson fluid would stain her body and the surrounding wood.

The scarlet worm was a valuable commodity in ancient Israel. People would collect the dead bodies of such female scarlet worms, crush them and extract from them powder that used to manufacture scarlet dyes.

The towla – the scarlet worm – would voluntarily affix herself to a tree where she would die, shedding her blood so that she might give life to her offspring.

Psalm 22 tells us that Jesus became the *towla – the scarlet worm- the one* crushed in death—so that we may be robed in glory.

His blood was shed so that we might live. Isaiah prophesied this about the Messiah:

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.
(Isaiah 55:5)

Jesus is our scarlet worm, through whose blood we are we are offered eternal and abundant life.

Tim Keller tells of a time when a fire ravaged the Yellowstone national park in North America. Afterwards some rangers trekked into the park to survey the damage. One ranger found a bird of which nothing was left except a carbonized, blackened shell covered in ashes, huddled at the base of a tree. The ranger knocked over the bird with a stick – and to his surprise three tiny chicks scurried out from underneath their dead mother’s wings. It seems that when the blaze broke out, the mother had remained steadfast instead of running. Because she had been willing to die, those under the cover of her wings had lived.

Jesus said this:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.
(Luke 13:34)

On the Cross, as he poured out his life, Jesus gathered us under the protective cover his wings. On Good Friday, on Bloody Friday we celebrate the awful fact that because he was consumed, we live!

Here is another testimony that points to this wonderful truth. Jeffrey Ebert tells the story from when he was a small child. Let me read it to you:

When I was 5 years old, before factory-installed seat belts and automobile air bags, my family was driving home at night on a two-lane country road. I was sitting on my mother's lap when another car, driven by a drunk driver, swerved into our lane and hit us head-on. I don't have any memory of the collision. I do recall the fear and confusion I felt as I saw myself literally covered with blood from head to toe.

Then I learned that the blood wasn't mine at all, but my mother's. In that split second when the two headlights glared into her eyes, she instinctively pulled me closer to her chest and curled her body around mine. It was her body that slammed against the dashboard, her head that shattered the windshield. She took the impact of the collision so that I wouldn't have to. It took extensive surgery for my mother to recover from her injuries.

In a similar, but infinitely more significant way, Jesus Christ took the impact for our sin, and his blood now permanently covers our lives.

Jesus is our Scapegoat whose shed blood takes away the shame and guilt of our sin.

Jesus is our Passover lamb whose shed blood rescues us from sin and slavery and death.

Jesus is our Scarlet worm whose shed blood offers us the gift of eternal and abundant life.

There is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the lamb. There is power, power, wonder working power in the precious blood of the lamb.

In his book *Written in Blood*, Robert Coleman tells the story of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. The doctor had explained that she had the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor.

"Would you give your blood to Mary?" the doctor asked.

Johnny hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled and said, "Sure, for my sister."

Soon the two children were wheeled into the hospital room--Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and healthy. Neither spoke, but when they met, Johnny grinned. As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, Johnny's smile faded. He watched the blood flow through the tube.

With the ordeal almost over, his voice slightly shaky, broke the silence. "Doctor, when do I die?" Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny had hesitated, why his lip had trembled when he'd agreed to donate his blood. He'd thought giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. In that brief moment, he'd made his great decision.

Today we celebrate the fact that Jesus did not just give his blood, he gave up his life as a once and for all time and for all people sacrifice so that many sons and daughters might be brought into glory. Jesus said it himself:

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.
(Mark 10:45)

None but Jesus could do it. None but Jesus could accomplish it. None but Jesus is enough.