

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, May 17, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

HEBREWS 9:22

“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”

THE PRECIOUS BLOOD OF CHRIST (3)

In the first two sermons in this short series we have seen what the Old Testament says about the blood of atonement. Now let us turn to the New Testament.

1. In 1 Peter 1:18 we read: “You know that you were ransomed (or “redeemed”) not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”

“You were ransomed...” That word “ransom” is frighteningly associated with the word “kidnap.” When you are kidnapped, you are forcibly captured, and you will be set free and redeemed only when the ransom money is paid. Silver or gold would be a most acceptable ransom today! But, says St. Peter, “you were not ransomed with silver or gold...” If gold or silver could have redeemed us and bought us back from the enslavement of sin, do you not think that God would have created on this earth ten thousand Mount Everests of pure gold? It would have been an easy matter for God to have done that. But we have not been redeemed by such “perishable” things, but by “the precious blood of Christ.” “Redemption” means “buying back”; it means “ransoming,” and that is what Jesus did for us when He died on the Cross.

I remember hearing once about a little boy who had caught a sparrow. The poor little bird was trembling in his hand when a gentleman came along and begged the boy to release it. But the boy said he would not, because he had chased it for three hours before he could catch it with his net. The man tried to reason with the boy, but in vain. At last, he offered to buy the bird; the boy agreed to the price, and it was paid. Then the gentleman took the poor little thing and held it out on his hand. The boy had been holding it very firmly, for he was so much stronger than the bird, just as Satan is so much stronger than we are; and there it sat for a moment, scarcely able to realize that it had regained its freedom. But soon it flew away, chirping, as if to say to the gentleman, “Thank you! Thank you! You have redeemed me!” That is what redemption is -- buying back and setting free.

And that is the Gospel, the “Good News” that Christ, by His death and resurrection has broken the chains of sin and set us sinners free. The first Adam, in Eden, was kidnapped, so to speak, by the subtle allurements of Satan; but Christ, the “second Adam,” ransomed us by His eternal sacrifice.

You remember in Cardinal Newman’s magnificent hymn, “Praise to the Holiest in the Height,” there is that thrilling stanza which reads,

O loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

Indeed, He did; and by grace, through faith, we receive in Christ all that Adam lost, and more. “You know that you were ransomed not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.”

2. Turn now to John 19:34: “But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and at once blood and water flowed out.” You remember how in Zechariah 13:1 the prophet had foretold that “On that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David... to cleanse them from sin and impurity.” And now, on Calvary, we have that blessed fountain opened! The Lord of Glory has been pierced by that Roman soldier’s spear. It seems to me that that was the crowning act of infamy, shame and sin. Look at that unknown soldier as he rammed his spear into the very heart of God! What a hellish deed! But what was the next thing that took place? As the spearhead was withdrawn, it was covered with the blood of the Redeemer! Oh! Thank God! The blood covers sin! That was the blood covering the spear – the very point of it that had been the awful instrument of shame! The very crowning act of sin brought out the crowning act of love. The spearhead of sin was covered by the blood of the Lamb! The crowning act of human depravity and wickedness was God’s crowning act of grace!

Years ago, when I was studying French at the university, one book on our prescribed reading list was a series of haunting short stories by that master of the French short story, Guy de Maupassant. I have never forgotten the one in which he describes a young man in Paris, the only child of his widowed mother. He became infatuated with an utterly unworthy young woman who soon became insanely jealous of his mother. One night when he was with her, she said to him, “Prove your love for me by bringing me the head of your mother!” He left immediately, and in a short time had perpetrated the dastardly deed. As he made his way blindly through the cobbled streets, bearing that which his lover had demanded, suddenly he stumbled and fell headlong on the treacherous stones. And from his mother’s lips came the quiet words, “Are you hurt, my son?”

Doesn’t it inspire repentance within us when we realize that God loves us so much that even the sharpened spear of our sin, which still smites Him to His heart, is covered with His precious atoning blood?

Oh, the deep, deep love of Jesus,
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free;
Rolling like a mighty ocean
In its fullness over me!

3. Let us examine now Colossians 2:13-14: “You were dead in sin.... Then God gave you a share in the very life of Christ, for He forgave all your sins, and blotted out the charges proved against you, the list of His commandments which you had not obeyed. He took this list of sins and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ’s Cross.”

Do you know that the complete list of your sins has been nailed to Christ's Cross? In Old Testament times, if a person became bankrupt, he was, of course, utterly humiliated, for a list of all his debts was written down on a sheet of parchment paper, and nailed up in some public place, usually at the gate of the town where he lived, with a nail at the top and another at the bottom. In this way, news of the man's financial collapse would soon be in the ears of everyone for miles around. But suppose a rich friend of the unfortunate bankrupt saw the list of his debts placarded before the public eye, he would sometimes take out the bottom nail, fold the parchment in two, write his own name across the doubled document, and then drive the bottom nail in again next to the top nail, thus securing the parchment in this folded form. His signature meant that he would be responsible for his friend's debts -- he would pay off every creditor -- and the bankrupt was said to have received "a double" for all his debts.

This explains the true meaning of the glorious words which we find in the 40th chapter of Isaiah, as the prophet exclaims, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, for she has received from the Lord's hand a double for all her sins."

From the Garden of Eden to the Cross of Calvary the sad record of human sin and failure was placarded before the world. The sin problem has always been our sternest enemy, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). As we have seen, in Old Testament times God, in His mercy, made it possible for sinful man to enter into renewed fellowship with Himself; and this was done when the sinner, in faith, offered upon the altar an unblemished lamb as his substitute to God. God was willing to receive this sacrifice in the place of the sinner. But all these Old Testament sacrifices for sin merely pointed forward in anticipation to that perfect and final sacrifice for sin which God was to make of Himself upon the Cross. The basic meaning of Christ's death on Calvary is that there, in one crowning act of undying love, He took our place, He paid our debt, He set us free from our complete spiritual bankruptcy.

Now, in that context, look again at Colossians 2:14: "He (God) took this list of sins and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's Cross." It is as if Jesus, on the Cross, held in His hand the parchment containing the sad record of your sin and mine; but the parchment is folded, and held there by the very nail that pierced His blessed hand! And on the outside of the folded parchment, written in blood, His blood, are the two words

JESUS CHRIST!

He has paid our debt!

As the old Gospel hymn expresses it,

My sin - Oh, the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin -- not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to His Cross, and I bear it no more;

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Oh my soul,

Before we were ever born, our sins were atoned for. Before we could ever love God, He loved us. It is not an easy thing for God to forgive. He hates sin but loves the sinner. Because He loved us, He Himself paid the penalty of His broken law -- He bore the penalty that we ought to have borne. The debt has been paid in full!

4. Turn now, if you will, to one of the most solemn, awe-inspiring passages in all of Holy Scripture, Hebrews 10:28,29: "A man who refused to obey the laws given by Moses was killed without mercy if there were two or three witnesses to his sin. Think how much more terrible the punishment will be for those who have trampled underfoot the Son of God and treated His cleansing blood as though it were common and unhallowed..."

If a person despised and violated the law of Moses, that law said that they could lead him out to the gate of the town and there, stone him to death. I ask you: What are you doing with the blood of Christ? Are you trampling upon it, and despising in your heart His sacrifice on your behalf? It is a terrible thing to make light of His shed blood, to laugh at and ridicule His atonement for sin. I would rather fall dead this very moment than to dare to do such a thing.

Recently the thought came to me and made a deep impression on my mind and heart. Did you ever realize that the only thing Christ left of His body on this earth was His blood? His flesh and bones He took away on the day of His Ascension. But when he ascended up on high leading captivity captive, He left His blood on Calvary's hillside.

What are you going to do with that blood so freely shed for you? Are you going to make light of it and trample upon it? You say, "I would never do that. I would never be guilty of such sacrilege!" But millions of fine people do just that very thing. Let me say something that may sound strange if not absurd to some of you. Do you know that some of the most morally upright, good-living people in this world are, at the same time, the greatest sinners in the world? They are sinners, not because they are not good — they are kind, generous, morally impeccable, but they have trampled underfoot the blood of the Cross.

You say, "How can this be?" Well, I will tell you. You ask a person like that this question: "Suppose you were to stand at Heaven's gate right now, seeking admission, and God were to say to you, 'Why should I let you into Heaven?' What do you think you would say?" Do you know what millions of good-living people would say? They would say, "Well, I guess I would say to God, 'I have always attended and supported the Church the best I could. I prayed and read the Bible frequently. I tried to live by the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, and the Golden Rule. I taught in the Sunday School, and I sang in the choir, and I always tried to be kind and helpful to people. I was a conscientious employee, a helpful neighbor, a loyal American, a faithful spouse, and a devoted parent.'" And on and on they go, telling God He should let them into heaven because of all the good things they have done! They are virtually trusting in their good deeds alone for salvation and admission into heaven.

And I say to such people, "If you can save yourself, why then did Jesus have to die and shed His blood on the Cross?" You see, they aren't trusting in Christ alone to pay their debt of

sin. They are trusting in themselves, and don't understand that there is a debt to be paid to a holy God which they themselves can never pay. And so, in trusting in themselves and not in Christ's atoning death, they are trampling underfoot the blood of the Cross.

Does that perchance describe your condition, my friend? The greatest sinner is the person who commits the greatest sin; and the most deadly sin of all is to despise Christ's atoning death, and imagine that in some incredible way you can fly to Heaven by the jet propulsion generated by your own good works!

If we could save ourselves, it just doesn't make sense that our Lord Jesus Christ should leave Heaven's glory to stoop to a manger and to agonize upon a Cross. But in love He did that because He came to do something for us that we could never do for ourselves -- He came to ransom us, to redeem us from sin's awful guilt and power.

Salvation is a free gift. You don't deserve it, and you can't earn it. Christ offers it to you. It is free, but it is not cheap. He has paid for it in full. So what God calls upon us to do is to acknowledge our need of Christ, receive Him by faith as our personal Savior and Lord, and trust Him alone to get us home safe at the last. God forbid that we should be guilty of despising His shed blood, His spotless life freely offered for our sins, by imagining that we can save ourselves.

5. Finally, let us glance at those majestic words found in Revelation 7:14, where, for one brief moment, the curtain is drawn aside, and we catch a fleeting glimpse of the saints in heaven: "These are they who have come out of great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." How could we possibly have our robes made pure and clean except at that fountain opened to cleanse us from sin and uncleanness? If we die without having the atoning blood applied to our souls, where will we be? -- without hope and without God!

An old minister of the Gospel was on his deathbed, and, as he reflected upon his long life, he knew that there was much that had been displeasing to his Lord. He asked a loved one to open his Bible at 1 John 1:7, and, putting his finger on that verse, "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin," he said, "I die in the hope of that verse!" It was not his life of faithful service for the Master, or his fifty years of Gospel preaching in which he trusted -- it was in the blood of Jesus.

May God grant that when we come at last to stand before the Judgment Seat of God, our robes may be washed white in the cleansing blood of the Redeemer!

AMEN.