

The whole story of the Bible – the whole of human history – rides on the current of blood.

In Genesis 4, the blood of Abel cries out to God for justice.

In Egypt, the first plague turned the water of the Nile into blood.

At the Passover, blood was placed on the doorposts of the house –
to prevent the angel of death from striking the firstborn.

The opening chapters of Leviticus spelled out in great detail
how our approach to God requires the careful use of blood.

And here in chapter 17 – right after showing the way back into the Most Holy Place in ch 16 –
the first thing God says is to remind his people *not to eat blood*.

Eating or drinking blood is consistently a cursed thing:

Think of how Revelation 16:6 speaks of this:

When the third angel pours out his bowl into the rivers and springs, they become blood.

And the angel of the waters says:

“Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments.

For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,

and you have given them blood to drink.

It is what they deserve.”

And so the title of tonight’s sermon should sound horribly disconcerting:

“Unless You Drink of His Blood, You Have No Life in You.”

When Jesus said in John 6, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,
you have no life in you,”

that prompted many of his followers to abandon him.

That’s just crazy talk.

How can an observant Jew say this?

Let’s look at this more carefully.

1. Eating Flesh and the Peace Offering (v1-9)

a. Killing an Animal Can Be Considered Bloodguilt (v1-4)

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the people of Israel and say to them, This is the thing that the LORD has commanded. ³ If any one of the house of Israel kills an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, ⁴ and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it as a gift to the LORD in front of the

tabernacle of the LORD, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people.

Killing an animal outside the camp – or even just killing an animal away from tent of meeting – is an act of bloodshed, and brings bloodguilt on the one who does it.

In other words, if you want to have meat for dinner,
you need to take the animal to the tabernacle.

First, I should note that this regulation only applies to the wilderness camp.
Once they are in the land, there will be a new set of regulations.
(Deuteronomy 12 says that if they are far away from the tabernacle,
they can slaughter animals *like* an offering in their own towns –
without *actually* bringing it as an offering to the tabernacle!)

But the short duration of this regulation does not render it pointless!

And this something that has been building up through Leviticus –
until now we cannot avoid it!

How is the death of Christ a sacrifice?
Because Christ died *outside the camp*.
According to the Levitical rule, every offering is killed *at the tabernacle*
Because of this, some have argued that Christ is not *really* a sacrifice.

But what does Hebrews say?
When Jesus offered himself – where did he offer himself?
He did not enter the earthly holy of holies –
after all, as long as the earthly sanctuary is standing,
it was a reminder that the way into the heavenlies is *shut*.

The earthly priests serve at the earthly sanctuary –
which is a “copy and shadow of the heavenly things.”
Jesus did not offer his blood on the cross.
Certainly he *shed* his blood on the cross –
but his blood was only offered to God
when he entered the heavenly holy of holies (Heb 9):

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come,^[e] then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify^[f] for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself

without blemish to God, purify our^[g] conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

So when Christ is crucified *outside the camp*

the chief priests are saying “this cannot be an offering!”

But this is part of God’s point in Leviticus about the center and the periphery.

Jesus is taken outside the camp.

Why?

Well, Hebrews 13 answers that:

¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tent^[a] have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Think about how Hebrews 13 says that.

Jesus suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.

In order for Jesus to be a full and perfect atonement for the sins of the people,

he had to suffer outside the camp.

Only then could his blood sanctify us.

And notice also that Hebrews speaks of “an altar” from which we eat.

This altar is not an earthly altar.

Jesus invites us to his heavenly altar –

so that we might partake of his flesh and blood.

Here in Leviticus 17, we start with flesh – and then move to blood.

In verses 5-7 we hear of the purpose of this regulation here:

b. The Purpose of This Regulation: the Peace Offering vs. Idolatry (v5-7)

⁵ This is to the end that the people of Israel may bring their sacrifices that they sacrifice in the open field, that they may bring them to the LORD, to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and sacrifice them as sacrifices of peace offerings to the LORD. ⁶ And the priest shall throw the blood on the altar of the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting and burn the fat for a pleasing aroma to the LORD. ⁷ So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations.

In the wilderness, *every time you ate meat* it was a peace offering.

Every time you ate meat,

you would bring the animal to the tabernacle and slaughter it there.

The reference to “goat demons” in verse 7

suggests that the reference to Azazel in the last chapter has demonic connections.

This is said to be a “statute forever for them throughout their generations” –

but plainly, the “forever-ness” of the statute has to do with the principle,

not with the detail –

because Deuteronomy 12:15 says,

“However, you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your towns,

as much as you desire, according to the blessing of the LORD your God

that he has given you....

Only you shall not eat the blood; you shall pour it out on the earth like water.”

In other words, follow the same principle of slaughtering that is used at the tabernacle.

Drain the blood out –

which will serve as a reminder of the tabernacle in all your towns!

It’s the same principle that has led Christians to pray before meals!

Scripture never says that we *must* pray before every meal,

but just as Israel butchered meat in a way that would remind them of the offerings

so also we approach our daily meals

in a way that reminds us of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ!

And so we give thanks!

Verses 8-9 then emphasize the importance of this statute:

c. The Penalty: Cut Off from His People (v8-9)

⁸ “*And you shall say to them, Any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice ⁹ and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the LORD, that man shall be cut off from his people.*”

A burnt offering is actually “an ascension offering” –

as the smoke ascends to God,

the animals transformed by fire into smoke that “goes up” to God in our place.

And a sacrifice is a peace offering.

We often use the term “sacrifice” as a general term for all offerings,

but in the OT, sacrifice refers to the peace offering –

and especially when paired with the term “burnt offering.”

The burnt offering – the ascension offering – is entirely burned in the fire

as a way of saying, “we are here to ascend the hill of the LORD”!

The peace offering – the sacrifice – is where we have fellowship with God –
and with each other.

So why does God say that the man who eats meat away from the sanctuary
should be cut off from his people?

Think back to how God clothed Adam and Eve after the fall?
They had clothed themselves in fig leaves.
God gave them animal skins.

The animal died in their place, so that they could be clothed.

If you are going to kill an animal and eat its flesh,
then its life – its blood – is poured out for you.
And its strength – its flesh – is consumed by you.

To eat meat apart from God is to say that we don’t need God.

This is why Jesus will say, “my flesh is real food.”
Every sacrifice in all of history had pointed to him –
from the animals that gave their skins for Adam and Eve –
to the animals that were slaughtered for meat in the towns of Israel!

By the way –
this is why “happy pigs” are important.

I know – pigs were unclean in the OT –
but the principle that Leviticus 17 teaches us
is that how we think about flesh and blood applies to animals.

The meat that you eat is supposed to point you to Jesus.
So, as good stewards of creation, you should want your meat to be treated properly.

I’ve heard that in some religions they ask forgiveness of the animals that they eat.
That’s going too far.
But there is a seed of truth buried in their erroneous practice:
the animal that you eat is *also* flesh and blood.
At the creation, when God made the animals, they became “nephesh hayyah” –
living souls.
And when God created man, he became “nephesh hayyah” – a living soul.

If you kill an animal that could be used as sacrifice in some other way,

then you are guilty of shedding blood – and you are cut off from God’s people.

God gave us dominion over the creatures.

Dominion means “lordship” – and how we rule is important!

We should exercise lordship over the creatures
the way that Christ exercises lordship over us.

Much of “big food” today is ruthless, greedy, and deceitful –
and it shows in the way that they treat the animals under their care.

So how you treat flesh is important.

And you may have noticed that the central concern in how you slaughter the animal
is to make sure that the blood is thrown on the altar.

(In Deuteronomy, when Moses permits the principle to be applied in the towns –
the result was that the blood was poured out on the ground –
the altar being made of stone,
if you have no altar, then the ground is the closest approximation).

So flesh and *blood* go together.

Except when you are eating!

2. Eating Blood Strictly Forbidden (v10-16)

a. The Life of the Flesh Is in the Blood – Given for Atonement (v10-12)

¹⁰ *“If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people.*

¹¹ *For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. ¹² Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.*

Why does God forbid Israel to eat blood?

Because the life of the flesh is in the blood.

And God has given blood for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls.

It is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

The life of the animal is in its blood.

So if the animal’s life is offered for yours –

then for you to eat the blood would be to partake of the life that was given for you

And that would make no sense – because the animal died in your place!

Now, you may seem puzzled by that.

Don’t we partake of Christ’s life?

Absolutely!

But that is the point.
We partake of Christ's life – but only because of the resurrection!

If Christ was still dead, then there would be no life to partake of!

That's why you don't eat blood.

The animal is dead.

Its life was spent for you – its blood was shed for you.

To eat of its blood would be to partake of *death* – not life!

The death of the animal became your death –

and so the life of the animal is what enabled you to draw near to God.

For you to eat of that life – would be to join the animal in death!

Verses 13-14 highlight the importance of this:

b. The Importance of Pouring Out Blood – NOT to Be Eaten (v13-14)

¹³ “Any one also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.

¹⁴ For the life of every creature^[a] is its blood: its blood is its life.^[b] Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.

It's not just animals that are used for offerings.

It's any animal that you eat.

And think about the rationale that Leviticus 17 uses:

The life of all flesh is its blood.

The ESV says in v14 – the “life of every creature” –

but in the context of Leviticus 17, it's important to say “all flesh”!

Flesh and blood go together.

If you are going to eat the flesh –
then the animal must die.

It must pour out its life – its blood – for you.

So don't eat the blood unless you want to die!

(That's the point of “whoever eats it shall be cut off.”

It's not explicitly saying “shall be put to death” –
but to be “cut off” from the people of God
is a sort of spiritual death).

Notice also the extension of the principle in verses 15-16:

c. Penalty for Eating Blood: Unclean – Moving Away from the Holy (v15-16)

¹⁵ And every person who eats what dies of itself or what is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or a sojourner, shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening; then he shall be clean. ¹⁶ But if he does not wash them or bathe his flesh, he shall bear his iniquity.”

Notice the mildness of the penalty.

This is by no means an absolute prohibition.

No one should *deliberately* – for no good reason – make himself unclean;
but what about a poor man who comes upon a deer that has just been killed by a wildcat?

The provision of “wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening” well, that’s not so bad!

I realize that I am taking uncleanness upon myself –
I am moving in a direction away from holy place –
and that’s not a *good* thing –
but my family needs to eat...

There are lots of these moments in the Law of Moses.

There is a very clear trajectory towards God – towards the holy –
this is the way that you should walk!

But there is also a recognition that within the “common” –
there is a difference between that which is an abomination,
and that which is “mildly unclean.”

How should we think about all this today?

It’s important to start by remembering that the prohibition against eating blood
is not unique to the Mosaic Covenant.

It goes back to Noah.

When God blessed Noah in Genesis 9 (after the Flood),
he said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth
[echoing the creation blessing upon Adam]
The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth
and upon every bird of the heavens,
upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea.
Into your hand they are delivered.
Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you.
And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.
But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.
And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning:
from every beast I will require it and from man.

From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.
Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.
And you, be fruitful and multiply,
increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.” (Gen 9:1-7)

As you can see, the prohibition against eating blood is not unique to the Mosaic Covenant.
It applies to all humanity through Noah.

That’s why the apostles include this prohibition at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

The Jerusalem was asked whether Gentiles needed to become Jews
in order to become Christians.

The answer was no.

As Peter put it in Acts 15:10,

“Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples
that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”

The details of the Mosaic law are not to be imposed on Gentiles.

But what does the Council conclude with respect to what Gentiles must do?

Acts 15:28-29 –

“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.”

In other words – the provisions of the Noahic covenant.

Some people wonder – “but Paul permits people to eat meat sacrificed to idols...”

I would say it differently:

Paul distinguishes between *the point* of the prohibition

(do not partake of idol feasts) –

and the misunderstanding of the prohibition

(do not eat anything that was slaughtered at a temple).

In Corinth, for instance, pretty much all meat was slaughtered at an idol temple.

Probably all the meat for sale in the market would have come from a temple.

Does this mean that Christians should not eat meat?

Paul’s answer is no – where an animal is slaughtered doesn’t matter!

(In other words, Paul is taking the Deuteronomy 12 approach to that!

Leviticus 17 requires all meat to be slaughtered at the tabernacle;

Deuteronomy 12 allows slaughter in your towns).

The point of the Jerusalem Council was that Christians should not partake

of idolatrous feasts.
Where the animal is slaughtered wasn't the point.
What matters is that Christians do not participate in idolatry!

Likewise, the Jerusalem Council forbade sexual immorality.
I hope that there is no controversy among us over that one!
Sexual immorality is still wrong!
(And we'll have opportunity to talk more about that next week).

So what about blood and things strangled?
(the connection between them is that when you strangle an animal,
its blood will tend to coagulate in the meat before it can be drained).

The apostles are telling us that the Noahic Covenant is still in force.
When you slaughter an animal, you should drain its blood.
And the way that Paul handles the "things sacrificed to idols"
provides the key to understanding "blood."

The point is *not* that "one drop of blood" pollutes the meat!!
The point is to make a good faith effort to drain the blood properly.

I know that many Christians disagree with me on this.
But I cannot conscientiously disagree with the apostles.
They said that Gentiles like me should obey this.
And they have God's covenant with Noah to back them up!

This is why what Jesus does is so important – and so shocking!
Jesus says that we must eat his flesh (that's not so surprising – if he is the sacrifice!),
and drink his blood (what?!!)

We saw very clearly earlier that flesh and blood go together *except when you are eating!*

But it is the resurrection that changes everything!
In all sacrifices *before* the resurrection, flesh and blood had to be separated
in order to accomplish their purpose!
The flesh had to be parted from the blood in order for the sacrifice to work.

But in the sacrifice of Christ, the resurrection brought a holy flesh and blood back together!
So that Christ's holy flesh becomes our true spiritual food.
And Christ's holy blood becomes our true spiritual drink.

(By the way, this is why if you are unable to partake of one element for health reasons,
you still get the whole Christ in each element!
His flesh and blood are *not* divided!)