

BLOOD COVENANT

EXODUS 24:3-8

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The time had finally arrived. Moses had led the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the Mountain of God. Along the way they had encountered various dangers including pharaoh's chariots at the Red Sea. They had been afflicted by thirst and hunger as they made their way through a desert wilderness. They had encountered the glory of God as He came down upon Mount Sinai, and they had heard His thunderous voice. They had received and promised to obey the commandments of the Lord, and now the time had come to seal the agreement, to enter into a covenantal relationship with their God. It would be a contract in which each party would make solemn promises to one another.

The covenantal ceremony began early in the morning. Moses built a simple altar just as the Lord had told him to do, a random pile of undressed stones that lay nearby. This would represent God's presence in the covenant making ceremony. It would also be the place where sacrifices would be offered unto the Lord. Then Moses built 12 stone pillars of rocks. These would represent each of the twelve tribes of Israel, the descendants of Jacob's twelve sons. Then he asked some of the young Israelite men to select a number of sacrificial animals, including young bulls, and to offer them as whole burnt offerings and fellowship offerings unto the Lord upon the altar. This was a familiar practice to the Israelites, something that took place throughout the Middle East in their day and time, but which seems strange and perhaps a little repugnant to our modern day tastes.

A word of explanation might, therefore, be helpful. A whole burnt offering meant that the entire sacrificial offering was to be consumed by the fire on the altar. The smoke would ascend into the heavens as an expression of complete and absolute dedication to God. Nothing would be reserved or held back for those making the sacrifice. A fellowship offering, on the other hand, was something to be shared, part of it being given to God and the rest of it shared with His people. It meant that a friendly relationship existed between the Lord and His people. It would be like inviting your friends over for dinner. Generally speaking, we invite those whom we know and like, those whom we consider to

be our friends. And this is precisely what Moses intended to accomplish as their sacrifices were offered to God. They would represent Israel's wholehearted devotion to the Lord as well as their desire to have ongoing fellowship with Him.

But that was not all. There were those bowls of blood that had been collected. What did they signify and how were they to be used in this covenant making ceremony? Once again this practice was well known throughout the ancient world, and its meaning still makes sense today. It can be summed up by what is recorded in Leviticus 17:11. This verse of Scripture reads, "For the life of the creature is in its 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." The blood within any animal's life, including our own, is very important. Without it we stop living. That's why blood transfusions can be the difference between life and death. In reality it is the most vital and precious part of our anatomy, and that, indeed, is its spiritual significance. It was the most precious thing that could be used to validate a relationship, especially a relationship with God. Basically the word "atonement" means *at-one-ment*, two things being joined together in a harmonious and complementary relationship. And that's precisely what the covenant making ceremony between God and the people of Israel was all about.

I suspect that at some time or another all of us have heard this expression, "That was a contract signed in blood." This is precisely what took place at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses took half of the blood and sprinkled it on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant, including the Ten Commandments, and read it to the people. In response, they declared, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." In response, Moses then took the rest of the blood and sprinkled it on the people. He said to them, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." The covenant between God and His people had been signed and sealed with the blood of the sacrifices.

Now of what relevance is all of this to you and me? Why should something which took place nearly 3,500 years ago mean anything to us in the 21st century? Indeed, for some people it has no relevance whatsoever. It's nothing more than a reminder of how barbaric things used to be centuries ago. But for us as Christians it is full of meaning. In fact, it's a very poignant reminder of how our salvation has been secured.

We, like the people of Israel, have entered into a covenant with God, validated not with the blood of bulls but with the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what He was talking about when He met with His disciples on the last night of His life in the Upper Room. He said, "This is My blood of the covenant

which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). In other words, a new covenant was being created that would embrace not only the Jewish people but all of humanity. It was the fulfillment and completion of what had taken place at the foot of Mount Sinai. In many respects it was similar to what had taken place there, but it was also different, in fact superior. That is what the writer of the book of Hebrews is telling us in the New Testament book that he wrote to Jewish Christians.

So let's turn to Hebrews 9:11-28 and take a brief look at this passage of Scripture. This is what we will discover. In verses 11-14 the writer is telling us that Jesus is our high priest. Now what does this mean? In the days of Christ, the Jewish people were still worshipping the Lord in much the same way as they had done in the days of Moses. Leading them in worship was a high priest. Once a year on the Day of Atonement, he would enter into the most sacred part of the temple in Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies. There he would seek to secure God's forgiveness for the sins of all of the people of Israel. The writer of the book of Hebrews is saying that this is precisely what Christ has done for you and me. He too has entered into the Holy of Holies, in fact, into a heavenly temple where He can obtain God's forgiveness for our sins.

Then in verses 15-22 we learn that Christ is the mediator of a new covenant. The first one was established at the foot of Mount Sinai when Moses sprinkled blood on the altar and on the people. Now a new one has been initiated by Christ who shed His own blood on our behalf. Just as the blood of the bulls represented the sacrifice of their lives on behalf of the people of Israel, the death of Christ and the shedding of His blood on the cross represents what was necessary for our salvation. For as the Scriptures plainly proclaim, "Without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness." In other words, there is no way that we can enter into a covenant with God, no way that we can gain access into His presence, no way that we can receive an eternal inheritance, unless a perfect sacrifice is offered on our behalf, and that sacrifice was the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally in verses 23-28 we discover that this sacrifice is a once and forever event. Each year the high priest of the Jewish people had to repeat what he had done the year before. He had to re-enter the Holy of Holies in the temple and go through the same ritual that he had performed previously. It was repeated over and over again. But with the death of Christ on the cross, the endless, repetitive cycle was broken. It would never have to be repeated again. That's why Jesus said just before His death, "It is finished." Everything that had been going on for well over a thousand years had been brought to a glorious conclusion. A new covenant between God and mankind had been established by

Christ. Through Him and through Him alone we have been saved. Or as the writer of Hebrews concludes, "So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him."

Hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Jeremiah spoke of a time when the Lord would make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. He would write it upon their hearts and they would once again become His people. That is, indeed, what took place on a hill called Calvary outside the walls of Jerusalem. An innocent, perfect human being was nailed to a cross and gave His life for His people, but not just Jewish people. He gave His life for all people and that includes you and me.

And furthermore, it was a life given at great expense. For you see, God never required the giving of human lives for the forgiveness of sin. Remember the story of Abraham and Isaac. In obedience to God, Abraham was willing to sacrifice the life of his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. That is what took place in many other cultures in the Middle East. The sacrifice of human lives, even children, was a common practice. But God said, "No. Abraham you have proven that your faith and trust in me is without question. Offer instead that ram over there caught in the thicket." So down through the years, the people of Israel had offered various kinds of substitutional sacrifices, including the bulls that were slain in the covenant making ceremony at Mount Sinai.

But here is the point that I must share with you. What God would not allow us to do, He Himself did for us. He provided for our salvation through the death of His very own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, or as John 3:16 so eloquently declares, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Many years ago, so the story is told, there was a drawbridge operator who had a young son whom he dearly loved. His son would frequently ask, "Dad let me go with you to work and watch as you raise and lower the railway drawbridge over the river." Finally the father relented, but he warned his son, "Stand at a safe distance, especially when I'm raising and lowering the bridge." All went well until the son saw an oncoming train off in the distance. The bridge had been raised to allow a boat to pass under. The boy knew that if the bridge was not quickly lowered the train and all its passengers would be killed. His father, up in the control room, had not seen the train or heard the cries of warning from his son. Then he looked down and to his horror saw that his son, trying desperately to pull a manual lever to lower the bridge, had fallen into the gears below. The father was faced with a terrible dilemma. Save his son or save the passengers on the train that was even now quickly approaching the

bridge. He did what he had to do. He lowered the bridge even as he heard the cries of his son in the agony of death. Those on the train never knew what had been done for them. Some of them saw the tears of the drawbridge operator who was now standing beside the bridge as the train raced by. Others paid no attention at all.

How about you and me? Have we ever really seriously contemplated what it cost God to enter into a new covenant with us through the sacrificial death of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ?