

What About the Blood?

^{NRS} 1Pe 1:17 If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.¹⁸ You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold,¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.²⁰ He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake.²¹ Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

What about the blood? I was ordained at a meeting of Mission Presbytery in Austin, TX seven years ago. Part of the fun of being ordained is that you have to go through all of these examinations- the last one being you get to stand up in front of the whole Presbytery and they get to ask whatever questions of you they like. When I was examined I had a joker ask me if I were a supralapsarian or an infralapsarian, terms normal people don't use much anymore. I blinked a few times and said, "I like Jesus?" Thankfully people laughed.

Later, some friends told me I was lucky- that I had gotten off easy. I asked them why. They said I was lucky that Peg, another pastor, hadn't been there- that she loved examinations and every time a candidate came before Presbytery she always had one question and one question only for them: "What about the blood?" And if they didn't answer the way she liked- she would always vote against them.

I thought about what they said. And I did feel lucky to have missed that question. I have no idea what I would have said. To be honest I've never felt comfortable with the weight some traditions have placed on the blood of Christ. In Texas I grew up surrounded by hymns like Power in the Blood, Are You Washed in the Blood, and There is A Fountain- all of which make cringe. I'll be honest, when I hear things like washing

in blood, it gives me the creeps- it's like going to church only to find Stephen King's Carrie leading worship.

But like it or not- this image of blood, of Christ's blood, it certainly shows up in the New Testament here and there. In the Gospels Christ talks about the bread as his body and the cup being his blood. The writer of Hebrews compares Christ's once and for all sacrifice of his blood with the sacrificial system of Israel that dealt with the symptoms of our guilt but never the root cause. And here in First Peter, Christ's blood is a powerful image. Not only does he write here that we are made new by Christ's precious blood, but he opens the entire letter addressing it to the brothers and sisters in Turkey chosen by God, sanctified by the Spirit, and sprinkled by the blood of Christ. For the writer of First Peter wanting to follow Christ starts by being marked by his blood.

And this is a struggle for me, I'll be honest. There's not only the ick factor- I'm not a big fan of being doused with people's blood. I'm guessing most of us aren't. But there's also part of me that recoils from the sense that the real meaning, the most important meaning of Christ, is his death. And in traditions that lift up the blood of Christ, this is very much the case. In these traditions over and over again we will hear that the most important thing Christ did is that he died for us. And while I certainly believe that Christ died for us- I don't think dying was his main goal in life. Like in kindergarten when the teacher asked what all the kids wanted to do and one kid writes shepherd and another writes carpenter- I can't see Jesus sitting there in the corner drawing a picture of a bloody lamb with an equals sign next to a little stick figure. We would send that kid to the school counselor in a heart beat- and we'd be right to do so.

And more seriously, if he really came only to die, then why the Gospels I want to ask? Why the ministry in Galilee? Why the teaching? Why the healings? Why all this *life and passion*- this life and passion that spill over the pages of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. Did you ever notice Christ's critics aren't mad at him because he's praying too much or is acting too religious- no, they're mad at him most of the time he's not acting religious enough, because rather than just stay in church all day, he's out there living and breathing and dancing from town to town- eating and drinking with the crowds, breaking the laws of the Sabbath to heal and to eat.

Now, for some of you I know Christ's death and his blood may play a big role in your faith. Believe me, I did OK in theology, I learned the doctrines of the church. I'm familiar with the rich theological traditions that try to figure all this out with what we call atonement theories. In our tradition we say things like all of humanity sinned in the garden when Adam and Eve ate of the tree of life, and because of this sin, humanity has to pay God back to atone, or make things right. Except there's a problem. And the problem is that since we offended *God*- we mere mortals are unable to pay this infinite price. But then, ha-ha! Christ being *both* human *and* divine *is* able to pay the penalty we ought to pay for sin but cannot. And so his death, his blood, frees all humanity from sin and death. And this, this Rube Goldberg contraption of a theology- this is why Jesus' blood is supposed to be so precious. Oh, I'm familiar with this way of telling the story- it just doesn't make a lot of sense to me.

For instance it doesn't make sense to me to think of God as being bound by all of these arcane rules and procedures- especially that God *couldn't* forgive us without blood.

God *can't*? The words 'God' and 'can't' are not words that make a lot of sense together to me.

And if it is just all about blood and death- then why was Christ's life so full of passion, his stories so strange and haunting, and his care for us so beautiful? Why did he seem to care so much for life, and life abundant he says, if he just came to die?

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Well, as I was feeling more and more relieved I was never asked this question about the blood on the floor of Presbytery, thinking I would probably be driving for UPS or whatever else Classics majors do if they're not pastors, I found a different perspective on Christ's blood this week. I had some help from an unlikely place- from a moody Danish philosopher who lived back in the 19th century- a guy by the name of Soren Kierkegaard.

Ol' Soren is a favorite of undergrads and seminarians alike because he was such a sarcastic, prickly guy. Though completely opposed to labels and schools of thought- today Kierkegaard is recognized as the first existentialist- a philosophy emphasizing the importance of the individual, of choice, and of really living life with passion and not just passing through. Kierkegaard was the original adolescent rebel- wittily making fun of his elders and sardonically attacking the great institutions of his day especially the church. Although it's important to understand while existentialists who come after Kierkegaard like Camus and Nietzsche and Sartre often do reject the church, Kierkegaard only attacks the church only because he values faith, authentic faith, so highly.

What he rages at over and over again in the church is how bland and unquestioning we can be- how robotic and herdlike we are sometimes never thinking or

choosing for ourselves what to believe. He once wrote: “Christians [People] rarely make use of the freedom they have, for example, freedom of thought. Instead they demand freedom of speech as compensation.”

Now, in Kierkegaard’s day, less true in ours but still true to some extent, Christianity wasn’t thought of a strange belief- a radical life. It was considered to be a very pleasant life, a normal life. You were born. You were baptized. And you went to church, and you listened to the nice pastor, and you lived your nice life. But you weren’t supposed to actually take all this business about Christ and his life seriously and let it effect you! We’re just supposed to show up once in a while, pretend to stay awake, and then stick around for the coffee and Danishes afterward- the pastry or the people in their case. Church was just something you do- words you say without really thinking much about them.

But to Kierkegaard this was the exact opposite of what faith is. Faith isn’t about appearances and getting dressed up and going to church to seem like nice people. And the last thing we should do is just come up with belief systems and creeds and theologies- as if faith is merely about what we think. No, for Kierkegaard faith and the church are only helpful if we come here preparing ourselves for an encounter- and not just with our friends or our pastors, but with the one, holy God. For Kierkegaard we come to church with some fear and trembling daring to wonder, “What is it God would have US hear and have us do this week?” Kierkegaard writes: “What it is to be a Christian is not determined by the *what* of Christianity, by doctrines and beliefs, but by the *how* of the Christian, with our actions, our choices, our decisions.”

And it's in this way that I started seeing how Christ's blood might indeed be precious. To Kierkegaard, and to me frankly, Christ's blood is precious not because of some complicated abstract theological system, especially one that elevates Christ's death over everything else he did and said. No, his blood is precious because in it we see the choice he made- the choice he made to live so fiercely and to love so passionately that the men who ruled the church of the day, frightened by all the unrest this life was causing, decided he had to be stopped. And so they gave him a choice- the ultimate choice. Stop loving us and live- but live in just the thinnest of ways. Or keep loving us and speaking out; and die.

Friends, Jesus Christ didn't come to us to die- he came to us show us how to live, and he showed us the most passionate, compassionate, and brilliant life the world has ever seen. But given the choice of becoming as weak and afraid of life as the pastors condemning him- a passionate death must have seemed infinitely more honorable. *This* is what his blood signifies- not his choice to die, but his choice to live and love even in the face of death. This is precious blood indeed.

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I came across a recording recently that stopped me in my tracks. It's from an interview between a daughter and her aging father. These are two, real life people, and their story was recorded as part of Storycorps, this project that aims at recording as many real lives as possible. In this one interview Mary McCormick asks her father Dan Andrews Jr. about growing up in Oklahoma during the depression:

“You grew up in the dust bowl and during the great depression. Tell me the scariest moment.”

He said: "During the Christmas vacation. And it was really really a cold winter. The snow was really heavy- that year it stayed on the ground until April. And my friend, his name was Joe, and I would help take care of his little brother and I would help him pick up coal along the railroad track. And one day I went by his house to get him and we wanted to play in the snow and his mother says no because we had to get coal.

And what he would do is walk along the frisco tracks near the station. And what would happen is that near the station the firemen would throw a lot of coal into the boiler trying to get the engine going. And he would shovel it in and shovel it in and some of it would fall on the floor into the right of way. And Joe would take a bucket and pick up the coal that fell and take it back home.

But now to tell you about the experience. We were walking along the track but all of the coal had fallen down into the snow and we couldn't find very much. And on down the track there was a trestle that crossed a big gully. It was a beautiful trestle made out of steel but the floor it was made out of big timbers. And the timbers were a few inches apart. And so he said well maybe there's some on the other side. Let's go ahead and go across. Now we had never walked on the trestle and we really knew better. But the train had already pulled out of the station so we felt secure you know in doing that. So we started walking across the trestle and suddenly we could feel the tracks shaking. And we heard the train whistle and away behind us was an express train that was coming through. And we didn't know about it. And uh it was whistling like crazy and so he started to grab his little brother's hand and run but his foot fell right between one of the cracks. And here we were in the center of the railroad track and his little brother had his foot stuck. And Joe kind of panicked and ran off the end of the thing and I got down and

tried to pull the little boy's foot out. And I lifted him up until he cried because his leg hurt. And I realized my goodness this is desperate. And suddenly it occurred to me to unlace his shoe. And I looked down and could see there was just one end of his shoelace was showing. And I pulled on it and miraculously the bow came apart. And they were high top shoes with real stiff soles. And I took my index finger and scrubbed at the shoe laces and loosened them and pulled his foot out and grabbed him up. And took him in my arms and I ran off the trestle and we got down the side of the hill and just as the train went across the steam from the engine showered us. And [and he started to choke up at this point] boy, if you don't believe in a guardian angel. I was so thankful."

I loved this story. But at the risk of contradicting this brave man, I'm going to be bold and say I don't think it was because of some angel that that boy is alive. It's because something inside of that old man knew he couldn't run away. Something inside of him made a choice that day to risk himself, risk his own blood, so that young boy might live.

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Our choices, our lives- these matter. And this old man from Oklahoma, and that young man from Nazareth- they made their choice, they put their blood on the line and made their choice to live with everything they had. How about you? What do you choose? **Amen.**