

## ***Blood Cleanses***

In the name of Jesus, our great High Priest, dear friends in Christ: In these evening meditations we have been pursuing a red trail through the Scriptures, investigating the many theological functions performed by blood. Up to this point, we've seen how it accuses of our sins against others. We've learned that it carries life and when that life is sinful, blood carries the sin too. We've seen how it connects us to other people – our blood relatives; and how the blood of Christ adopts us into the family of God. Two weeks back, we saw how the blood of Jesus covers our sins and thereby atones for them. And then last week in various images scattered throughout both the Old and New Testaments, we saw how with respect to the Christ and his mission to save us, blood marks him as the bearer of sin. The Scriptures use blood and its red color to draw our attention to persons and things that are prophetic foreshadows of the work Jesus did for us on the cross.

This evening we come to yet another biblical function of blood. And I'll say right up front that this one, on the surface at least, makes the least amount of sense. We heard about it in the reading from Revelation. St. John, in his vision, is given a glimpse of the heavenly throne room, where an innumerable multitude of white-robed saints from every tribe and nation are assembled. They are waving palm branches and giving honor and praise to God and to the Lamb for their salvation. When asked to identify the people in this vast crowd, one of the elders explains to John "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

It's at that point I want to say, "Wait. Come again? They *washed* their robes in the Lamb's blood, and the robes came out sparkling white?" That's strange. Stranger still is that this text comes up every year on All Saints' Day. It's often used at funerals too. But no one ever asks how it is that washing in blood makes clothing white. That's not the way it works. No, over the years I've seen thousands of television commercials for laundry detergents boasting about how their product is effective on a list of particularly stubborn stains like grass, grease, chocolate, what have you; but always included on that list is *blood*.

Blood is notoriously difficult to wash out of clothing – which is bad news for criminals and good news for forensic scientists. The reason is that the same agents in blood that cause it to clot when exposed to air (thus keeping you from bleeding to death from the tiniest cut) also cause it to bind tenaciously to fibers. In preparation for this message I searched the collective wisdom of the internet to find the best methods for removing blood stains from clothing, and all of them came with a warning to be patient. Even after many applications of their recommended technique, some of the blood is likely to remain. So, how is it that the robes of the saints washed in blood have come out not red, but dazzling white as if they had been washed in bleach instead?

To answer, we must be aware that St. John's Revelation of Jesus Christ is an example of apocalyptic literature. As such it is not to be read and understood like a newspaper or textbook. Rather you are to recognize at the outset that it is written in what might be thought of as a form of code in which the things spoken of aren't exactly what they seem. In apocalyptic literature symbols are used to convey ideas. Physical images represent spiritual realities.

Obviously if your robe was dirty and needed to be washed, scrubbing it in lamb's blood wouldn't make it clean or white. But we're talking about the blood of Christ the Lamb here. And it's not being applied to people's clothes *externally*; it's being applied to their hearts, minds, and souls *internally*. That's where its power to cleanse and purify has affect. The result of this cleansing is seen symbolically in the white robes the saints are wearing.

And we want to understand this in two ways. First there is the imputed righteousness of Christ that is received by faith. It's the other half of the great exchange: Christ takes our sin upon himself when he goes to the cross, yes, but he doesn't then leave us standing before judgment seat of God in a morally neutral status; no, he also gives us the credit of the perfect life he lived on our behalf. *His* good works are counted as ours. We receive the rewards *he* earned. The same idea is conveyed in Baptism when we are said to be clothed with Christ so that when the Father looks at us he doesn't see the rotten sinners we really are but rather his own Son, so that he says to us, "You are beloved child; with you I am well pleased."

So, that's one way to look at the blood-washed white robes the saints are wearing: the imputed righteousness of Christ; but there is a second aspect to it. That comes through in the reading from Hebrews where the author says of the blood of Christ that it purifies our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. He's referring to the new nature that lives within the believer. Everything about the old nature is corrupt. It's dead in trespass and sin. Its conscience is defiled to the point that it only wants to make excuses for sin or justify itself by pointing to imagined good works that it believes ought to please God. The new nature is free of that. It knows that it stands in Christ's righteousness. It knows that it doesn't have to justify itself. And being free of sin it wants to please God and serve the neighbor. It rejoices in doing what's right.

This new nature lives in you by the blood of Christ. In John's Gospel Jesus says, "Unless you eat my flesh and *drink my blood* you have no life in you." In an earlier devotion, we learned that the life is in the blood. In Holy Communion Jesus gives you his life: his life in you both to declare you righteous and to sanctify you by works of love that he will achieve through you. It's worth noting that later in Revelation, St. John is given a vision of Christ returning for his Church. He describes it as the marriage of the Lamb and his Bride. She (the Church) is arrayed in a dazzling white gown. And though it may sound a bit odd to our Lutheran ears, the white of her gown is said to represent the righteous deeds of the saints. And that makes sense: no one can see in you the righteousness of Christ imputed by faith. What they see is the clothes you are wearing. In other words, they don't see what you believe; they see what you do.

The blood of Christ cleanses. It cleanses us from sin to reckon us righteous and it purifies the conscience to free us to serve the living God. May we who have washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb trust in its cleansing power that we live in saving and Christian love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***