

## ***Blood Covers***

In the name of him who for our sins made full atonement, dear friends in Christ: In our ongoing series of meditations on the Scripture's treatment of blood, we've learned that it's a substance with many talents. So far we've seen that blood accuses us of our sins and speaks of our need to repent. We've seen that blood carries life and when that life is sinful, it carries the sin too. Last week we saw that blood also connects. It links us to those who are our blood relatives; and through the blood of Christ, we are adopted into the family of God. Who could have guessed that blood was so versatile? And it may surprise you to know that at this point, we're not yet half way done with the Bible's trail of blood that leads us to the cross.

Moving forward on our sanguine quest, this evening we come to yet another attribute of blood; namely its ability to *cover*. There are things that ought not be seen; things that are best hidden from view. And it turns out that blood has the capacity to cover them and to hide them from sight.

We see this already with Adam and Eve when they fell into sin. The immediate result of their eating the forbidden fruit, the very first thing that happens, is that they realized they were naked. They became ashamed of themselves – of their own bodies. What's going on here is a turning around of their focus. Before the fall, in their state of perfection, both Adam and Eve were focused solely on the other. All Adam could see was Eve. All he wanted to do was protect, serve, and care for her. Eve saw Adam the same way. This is why they had no consciousness or concern about their own nakedness. They weren't thinking about themselves. But the nature of sin is to turn the focus of attention onto the self. A person in sin is the center of his or her own universe. All things revolve around me. Good is defined as what serves and pleases me; bad is what doesn't.

On the surface, Adam and Eve became ashamed of the outward appearance of their bodies. And so they tried to cover up – quite inadequately I should add. Fig leaves simply aren't going to do the trick. But on a much deeper level, what Adam and Eve were really trying to hide from each other (and from God and the rest of the world) is how selfish and self-centered they had become. Sure, we hide our private parts from public view; but even more we hide our private thoughts and motives. *That's* what we are truly ashamed of. *That's* what we want no one to see. And though we try to cover them with various sorts of figurative fig leaves, our sinful shame is, as often as not, still exposed. We're not fooling anybody.

It required God's intervention to properly cover our first parents' nakedness. He provided them clothes made of animal hides. They would have been a lot more durable and comfortable than leaves. But there is a lesson there too. To get clothing made of animal hides, you have to kill the owners of those hides. The Lord is saying to us that to properly cover the shame of sin requires the shedding of blood. The skins of animals covered the skins of Adam and Eve, but the blood of those animals covered their sinful hearts.

In the meditation in which we heard of blood's capacity to carry, we saw how that in the Old Testament sacrificial system the blood of animals carried the people's sins to the altar that stood immediately in front of the Lord's House. The message there was that we were dumping all of our sinful shame on the Lord's front porch – and by extension onto the Lord himself. We were filing him and his house with our sins. Now, try to imagine living in a house in which you

could never take out the trash: how all the stinking garbage would pile up and soon make the place completely unlivable. At some point you'd have to rent one of those honking big dumpsters they use on construction sites, and haul all that accumulated trash away. That was the whole idea behind the annual observance of the Day of Atonement we heard about in the reading from Leviticus. It was like spring cleaning for the Temple (except it happened in the fall). It was the day on which a year's worth of piled up sins got removed from God's House and taken to the dump.

But to understand it, we have to start with that unfortunate word *atonement*. It doesn't mean what it's supposed to mean. It's actually a made-up word. Pull it apart and you'll see that atonement is "at-one-ment". That would imply the word means something like reconciliation, the bringing together and making of peace between parties in conflict; in this case between God and sinful mankind. The two become one. But that isn't how we use the word in English. We use it to mean making reparation for a wrong or injury. When a husband does something stupid that makes his wife angry, he *atones* for his offense by buying her flowers or chocolate bonbons. He does a good deed to get back on her good side. Neither idea though captures the true meaning of the Hebrew word we that translate as atonement. The word really means to cover. The Day of Atonement should more accurately be called the Day of Covering.

As we heard, on that day a bull was sacrificed as a sin offering for the high priest; a whole bull for just one man. The idea was that he had to be completely absolved of sin himself before he could perform his priestly duties this day. He had to be blameless and free of sin. Then two goats were brought forward. The high priest would cast lots over them to determine which was to be sacrificed and which was to be for "Azazel" - a word that means "sent away". It's what we call the *scapegoat*. By casting lots, the actual decision about which goat was which was left up to God. The Lord chose the sacrificial victim and the scapegoat.

Having made that choice, this was the one day in the whole year that the high priest entered the Temple and went beyond the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The latter was the dwelling place of the Lord God - like his private room. In it sat the Ark of the Covenant, the locus of God's presence on earth. The top of the Ark was called the Mercy Seat. It was considered the throne of God. And above the Ark, between the two golden angels that adorned its lid, was the Shekinah - a cloud-like visible manifestation of God's glory that hovered there.

The high priest would then take the blood of the sacrificed goat, and he'd pour it out on the Mercy Seat to make the atonement, that is the covering. The idea was this: in the Ark were the second tablets of stone that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. On them was written by the finger of God the Law - the Law that demands death for sin. But now, with the blood on top of the Ark, the Lord looks down on his Law and sees that it's covered. The death the Law demands has been satisfied. Blood has covered the sins of all.

But the sins still had to be dealt with. That's what the scapegoat was for. Having made the atonement, the high priest would then come out of the Temple and confess upon the head of the scapegoat a year's worth of sins for the entire nation. That goat would then be driven out into wilderness bearing the sins of all.

The thing to see is that all of it points to Christ and his work for our salvation. He is our sinless high priest who needs no sacrifice to prepare him for service. He is at the same time the sacrifice whose blood covers our sins, blotting them out before the eyes of the Lord. And he is also the sin bearing scapegoat who was driven out of the City of God carrying the cross upon

which he would make that ultimate sacrifice. It's all about Jesus and how his blood covers our shame and takes away our sin. Everything the Day of Atonement foreshadowed was completed by Jesus once and for all.

And that explains why we don't observe the Day of Atonement anymore. Christ our high priest has offered the ultimate sacrifice and covered us all. In our time, we become participants in the sacrifice of his covering through Baptism. That's when the Scripture says we are clothed or covered in Christ. In Baptism the righteousness of Christ covers our outward shame, and his blood poured out covers our sinful hearts. All the evil that should never be seen is hidden from view forever. And Christ by his love for us covers a multitude of sins.

And that's our calling too. Having been covered by the blood of Christ, we are called to apply that same blood to cover the sins of others. We do this first by sharing the Gospel, telling unbelievers of what Christ has done to save them and leading them to Baptism by which their sins will be covered also. Secondly we do it when it comes to our knowledge that a fellow believer is caught up in a sinful situation and we go to them privately to restore them. Then we confront them with their sin, call them to repent, and if they do, we declare Christ's forgiveness. The sin is covered never to be mentioned again. Thirdly, we do it in a general sense when we simply keep the Eighth Commandment that calls us zealously to protect and guard the reputation of others. We don't transmit gossip; we squash it. Love, like the blood of Christ, covers a multitude of sins. So let's use it. The blood of Christ covers. Let it cover you, and use it to cover the sins of others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***