

BLOOD ENOUGH FOR THE PEACE OF THE WORLD

A series of four studies on the matter of covenant.

Other titles are:

- God's covenant, the inner dynamic of creation
- The one love that endures
- A future as sure as God

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Spilling blood signifies someone taking the life of another, or, someone laying down their lives for another. Enormous efforts are being expended today in trying to avoid the spilling of blood—through negotiation, counselling, intervention—but still, it goes on. It seems that our world cannot continue without spilling blood.

In the ancient story of Cain and Abel, the older brother killed the younger—and so began the saga of blood letting. Our own century has had it in plenty. Our own era is filled with feuds. The sophistication of modern statecraft is unable to suppress the rising anger of a new generation. Anger boils over. And when it does, others need to risk the spilling of their blood to suppress the evil.

In our morally tolerant society, we should take heed of Israel's ancient wisdom. A person who plays with another man's wife should expect vengeance (Prov. 6:27–35). He is not concerned to tell us what is right or wrong in this regard but just what we should expect.

Vengeance? Retribution? Yes!

When someone violently takes the life of another, their spilt blood cries out for vengeance. It is not human justice that requires this but God's. He gave life to each person. He taught Israel that the life of anything was in its blood and that if that blood was spilt, they would have to answer to God. The same applies to any person taking advantage of another.

Jesus taught the same in a heightened form. If I am angry with my brother, though I spill no blood, I stand in danger of judgement from God to whom belongs the life of my fellow human being.

If the word vengeance seems inappropriate because it suggests a personal vendetta, retaliation, gaining personal satisfaction from seeing another suffer as oneself, then,

the term retribution may be preferred. The following Bible references show that the real issue is not what we feel about this or that, but what action God will take. If this is not clear, we may well be confused about the feelings that remain in us about wrongdoing.

Vengeance is God's to take—not ours (Deut. 32:35; I Sam 24:12). Vengeance is taken against God's enemies rather than our own (Num. 31:3). God takes vengeance against his own people when they break his covenant with them (Lev. 26:25). God's people should love rather than avenge themselves (Lev. 19:18). God himself mixes forgiveness with vengeance (Ps. 99:8). The difference between God and man in this matter is illustrated by God's care of Cain (Gen. 4:15) and, by contrast, his descendant's resentment (Gen. 4:24). God condemns vengeance with malice (Ezek. 25:15; cf. v17 and Nah. 1:2).

We may look with dismay, and perhaps distain, at the violence in other lands, but our advantage is not our better living so much as the better restraints that have been developed. We have violence in our hearts and violence in our homes—even if not physical. What, then, of the reactions to these things? If there is no ointment for verbal and familial spite, what peace can we expect to have? What violence may we expect to erupt?

If we do not dissolve the hatred and quench the violence within us or among us, God himself sees the blood spilt on the earth—actual or intentional, and it cries out to him for vengeance. Is it any wonder that we have turmoil in the earth? We are dealing not only with angry people but an offended Father.

The myth of an unengaged God is widespread. We distance him from earth's troubles. But this does no justice to what he has told us about himself. It also leaves our consciences uneasy—even if sedate. We do not diminish guilt by saying that there is no Judge in the land. Nor do we have any reference point for the outrage we feel when great wrong is done.

A creed outworn?

God gave to Israel—and through them to the world—a worship in which they could offer a beast instead of their own life for the offence they had given to God. We may call this primitive but Israel's true worshippers were not superstitious. The blood of beasts didn't remove their offence. Rather, the ceremony conveyed to them the consequences of their sin—the reality of God's anger against it. It proclaimed the objective fact that God had provided a way of atonement for them, and so, their sins were declared to be forgiven.

Atonement is the offering of a sacrifice to avert the wrath of the one offended. Its Biblical name is propitiation. Some scholars have sought to disprove that this element was in Israel's ancient sacrifices, and especially, that it could not be part of what Jesus did when he was crucified. Modern sensibilities revolt against the idea that God could require this.

If Israel's sacrifices or Christ's death are thought to be a human action to placate a furious Deity, the idea should certainly be rejected. God does not need to be

persuaded to be gracious. Rather, it is God himself who is gracious and provides the offering to make atonement. In the case of Christ, we are speaking of God's own Son who understood and was fully implicated in the love of making atonement.

The cross stands in our history as the declaration that what we have done—to the world, to one another, and especially to God himself—is decisively rejected and punished. But it is in this action, and especially because of it, that love has been established forever.

Atonement is not a fiction. For lack of a true atonement—by God and for God—we must endlessly invent systems of our own which we hope will put us in the right.—or, which will extract proper reparation from those who do wrong. This is our culture—the tent we build for ourselves under the unfriendly skies of God's being offended with us.

Our lack of true affection for one another and the violence that broods in our minds when we cannot get what we want is an offence to God. To protect ourselves from it, we must endlessly be making provision to keep our fears sedated and our consciences preened.

The sacrifices of Israel were better than we can do ourselves. Their coming to the temple, with a lamb to kill, acknowledged that it was with God that they had to do; all life belonged to him. Their slitting of its throat acknowledged that their life was forfeit for their personal failure. Yet they acknowledged in this substituted beast that God himself would make atonement for them. All their attention was focussed on God to atone for them and not on their deeds by which they may have sought to excuse themselves.

Is it true that—to use Wordsworth's lines in a different setting:

'For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. —Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn...'

God has given a Lamb for the sins of the world. It is a fact—God has made atonement for the sins of the world. His own Son, fully human, came to make atonement for us. He was no helpless victim but a willing shepherd laying down his life for his sheep, a priest offering his own blood, a judge suffering his own penalty. His deed was no ceremony needing constant repetition but God actually dealing with our sin, and humanity actually standing under the judgement of God.

Blood? Yes!

I have spoken of blood as I have for two reasons. Firstly, we may think that mention of blood in regard to faith in God is merely ceremonial, perhaps even pagan. But, for all our sophistication, we retain an uneasy conscience, and, are unable to sedate the thirst for reprisal.

Secondly, there is no way for the truth about us and the truth about God to be brought out into the open, let alone for reconciliation to occur, without it costs a life—and it must be a life that is significant to both God and ourselves. Frankly, our

ungratefulness and arrogance toward our Creator means that our lives are forfeit. If someone is going to try and avoid talking about death—a violent death—they are not being real.

Jesus Christ is significant to God because he is his Son—on whom all his love is focussed. ‘Significant’ is hardly the word; ‘everything’ is better. If something happens to the Son, it happens to God. If the Son does something, it is God who has done it. God will do anything for the Son—whatever he asks. He has given the Son total responsibility for us. He can save us. He will judge us. The Son is constantly in the eye of the Father, and everything he does, he does for the Son. If we kill the Son, God sees that too.

But Jesus Christ is significant to us also. We were created through him and for him—our humanity has him for its prototype and goal. He was sent to us to share our humanity. God made him subject to every frailty and vicissitude of our life. He made him feel every trial of our humanity. He then ‘laid on him the iniquity of us all’—to quote the prophet.

Here is the man who really understands us, who penetrates what we really are. Christ knows that our ‘problem’ is God—that we stand under his scrutiny and curse. He knows that every day is spent in uneasy self-establishment because we have no peace. It is into this hell especially that Jesus descended in his death.

When he had finished what he had to do and to bear—on the cross—he had nothing left. His blood had been spilled on the earth.

This Jesus, God raised from the dead—again, for us. There is nothing we need more urgently than to be delivered from the fear of death and nothing other than Christ defeating death is sufficient to accomplish it.

Theories of atonement will be written and rewritten, but the fact of atonement is written in the history of Jesus. It is retold in the life of every person who receives God’s gift of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

Forgiveness

If the blood of violence calls out to God for vengeance, what does Christ’s blood call out for? When God’s Son offers up a true sacrifice, pleasing to God, on behalf of us who offend him, it cries out for forgiveness. Jesus uttered the cry himself, from his cross: ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’

The spilling of the blood of Christ does not simply add to the hostility and further the complications of human reprisal. Christ is our Brother, not accuser. He called himself our friend, not our enemy. Surely, we have been loved—loved personally, and totally. Is there anything more God could do than give his own Son, and is there anything greater Christ could give than his life?

We killed him. We kill him again when we don’t care that he has loved us. But his blood is God’s gift—and there is peace of conscience for anyone who comes to him. Our lives were forfeit for our deeds, but his was forfeited in our place. His life

ascended to the Father as a humanity pleasing to him, and, through faith in him, we also come to the Father.

The sprinkling of Christ's blood on us (like Old Testament sacrifices) is said to sanctify us. The taking of Christ's life is vengeance enough says God. Christ's giving of his life is pleasing enough says God. In his name, sprinkled with his blood, we know we are at home with God. By his deed we are made clean.

For whom? For the world!

Around the world, when Christians break bread and drink wine at the communion feast, they repeat the words of Jesus: 'this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'. God has a covenant with this creation. He has bonded himself to it forever. He will not forsake what is his.

God had promised to make his covenant anew—through forgiveness. It is this covenant which Christ sealed with his blood. So, God's covenant with creation is made valid and potent and binding. Then, the prophet said, we would have his law written on our hearts, we would know God. He would have no quarrel with us, nor we with him.

Wherever people believe in Christ—in his blood of the covenant, they know that they have met with God, and have peace with God, and need not be afraid in the world. The urgency to defend their own culture (rather than simply contribute to it) is gone—for their keeper is God. The blood spilled once on the ground settles their hearts regarding every other relationship. They have the friendship of God. They can love their enemies.

God's covenant is with all creation. There is no opting out of it. It is still the polity under which we live; it is the constitution by which our days are regulated; the government is upon Christ's shoulder and he will not fail or be discouraged until he has established justice in the earth. The justice he will establish is not the crushing of our enemies or, necessarily, the removing of us from their sphere of influence, but rather, the knowledge of his grace bringing our hostility to an end and creating a whole new justice—based on love..

What then of those who refuse this blood of God's covenant? They have 'spurned the Son of God' and 'outraged the Spirit of grace'. God's vengeance is directed against all wrong doing, but, primarily, against the ungrateful person who prefers his or her own sullenness or indignation to God's faithful dealing with our humanity.

We crave for a world without violence. But to ignore the blood of God's covenant is to give ourselves up to constant festering of anger and perennial eruptions of violence.

Then let us trust in the God who establishes the truth and power of his love through the blood of his Son. We may have to wait for the peace of the earth. But we shall have the peace of God in the earth, and shall pour it into the relationships we have here and now. His peace shall be established soon enough.

To consider

When two people take hostile action against each other, who is their adversary?

Why is our sophistication of sentiment and method unable to stop bloodshed among us?

If Jesus is the Son of God, and sent by God, what has happened when his blood has been spilt on the ground?

If Jesus, as humanity's Shepherd, by God's will, is pleased to take our place, what happens to us when vengeance has been executed on him?

If the shedding of blood is the giving of everything that a person has, what does it mean that Christ has given himself up for us?

What does Christ say to the people caught up in violence of all kinds in our world? To those who suffer helplessly under it? To those who perpetrate it?

To read

Jeremiah 31:31–34; Matthew 26:26–29; John 6:52–65;
Colossians 1:15–20; 2:13–15; Hebrews 10:26–31; 12:22–29