

The Blood of the Covenant¹

Repulsed by the Old Testament sacrifice of animals, many people close their eyes to the truths in these portions of Scripture. They understand that the Old Testament points to the promised Saviour of the New Testament, but the bloody stories of a warlike God offend some.

However, the old covenant embodies the discipline, divine nature, and dramatic revelation of a loving, trustworthy Lord. The Old Testament reveals

- the depth of humankind's depravity;
- the seriousness of people's sin;
- the extent of God's wrath;
- the depth of God's love;
- the need for a redeeming Saviour.

Moses understood these issues. He told the Israelites that to cover human sin, blood must be shed. The power of the blood must accompany any approach to the Father. And as the blood of the old covenant spilled onto the altar and was sprinkled on the people, God revealed His redeeming grace and the forgiving power of His mercy.

The Blood

Why blood? Moses explained, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life" (Lv 17:11). The rituals of blood pointed to the seriousness of sin. Lifeblood must be given for atonement. Someone, or something, must give its life. God's wrath needed satisfaction. Rather than require the death of the guilty parties, God offered grace by allowing the sacrifice of animals in their stead.

Yet in the deepest recesses of God's heart, His delight was not in blood sacrifice but in the yielding and surrendering of His people's lives in dedication to Him. As Samuel said to Saul, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams" (1Sm 15:22). David also said, "For You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; You will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Ps 51:16–17).

The blood, used to foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ, pointed to something deeper. The Lord yearned for reconciliation and fellowship—something blood sacrifice could only signify. He knew the blood spilled on the altar and sprinkled on the people was temporary. One blood sacrifice, greater than the blood of rams and goats, was needed to change the focus from the Law to the incomprehensible mercy of God. One blood sacrifice made on an altar of wood was still to come.

The Altar

Moses built an altar as his first sign of the covenant relationship to consecrate the people to God (Ex 24:4–5). At the foot of the mountain, he ordered the slaughter of animals. Although God had not yet fully described the importance of sacrifice in the Law, Moses knew what he must do. To the Israelites and other ancient peoples, an altar meant a place for putting something to death, not only physically but also in their hearts. The altar also represented God's presence.

The blood sprinkled on the altar represented a life offered, or poured out, to Him in sacrifice. Sacrifices were not wasteful or extravagant acts of worship. Most sacrifices were eaten. The altar was the point where the people, the priests, and God held a meal together to show their relationship of peace and fellowship.

As a place of fellowship, consecration, and sacrifice, the altar had to be sanctified through blood. The sanctified altar, then, became holy ground on which to lay the sin offerings of the people. The throwing of blood on the altar signified access to God; the blood of a chosen substitute replaced their own lives, now committed and dedicated to Him.

The Cross

Jesus' disciples understood the blood of the old covenant, but could they possibly comprehend the depth of Christ's words on Maundy Thursday evening when He lifted a cup and spoke of the blood of the new covenant (Mt 26:27–28)? Christ often foretold His suffering and death, yet no words could prepare the disciples for the events that followed.

Another altar rose above the earth that Good Friday, wooden and roughly cut. It would hold the Sacrifice, the One whose blood would redeem all people for all eternity. The Father in heaven observed Jesus' obedience and accepted the sacrifice. For in the heavenly tabernacle, an everlasting covenant—a new covenant—was made (Heb 9:11–14). By the cross, His disciples became partakers in His life and possessors of the heavenly inheritance (Heb 9:16–22).

The New Covenant and You

Just as a meal followed the sacrifices of the old covenant, so God's people commune with Him today at the Lord's Table. When you receive the body and blood of Christ, His fullness fills you. His mercy forgives you. His grace redeems you. You rest assured in the blotting out of all your sins (1Jn 1:7). With immediate deliverance and total justification, you know that God's wrath has been averted, for He no longer sees your sins but the covering of blood sprinkled on your behalf.

In this new life, dedicate yourself in service to Him, for God has revealed the redeeming grace of His love and the forgiving power of His mercy by the blood of the new covenant. That blood, spilled on the altar of the cross, now saves you. You are His forever.

¹ Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 136). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.