

**The (Better) Blood of the Covenant**  
**Hebrews 9:15–22**  
**March 10, 2024**

Today is the latest installment in the sermon series we *could've* called:

*Life transforming gospel truths—soaring realities<sup>1</sup>—communicated via detailed descriptions of religious practices from thousands of years ago in a place thousands of miles away.*

In this latest installment, I'd like to quickly zoom out and review some of that argument. Beginning in chapter 4 and continuing through the end of chapter 7, we considered the Old Testament priest. We considered that office, with detailed descriptions, *so that* we might see what—or Whom—it anticipated, escalated toward, and resolved in. With that framework in place, we began to consider the *place* where those Old Testament priests served—the earthly tabernacle—both at the beginning of chapter 8 and the beginning of chapter 9. Of course, Hebrews took us to that tent *so that* we might see that which it anticipated, escalated toward, and resolved in. Then Hebrews took us to the overall framework under which both priest and tabernacle operated in: the Mosaic Covenant. Though I'm not *always* a broken record, we were taken there as well *so that* we might see that which *it* anticipated, escalated toward, and resolved in.

There was a priesthood; there's a better Priest. There was a tabernacle; there's a greater and more perfect one. There was a covenant; there's a new and better covenant.

Which led us last week to what inaugurated that new and better covenant—what brought about those better promises—that better priest offered a better sacrifice: Himself. Having obtained eternal redemption for His covenant people, He entered the true and better Holy Place, that which the earthly tabernacle anticipated, escalated toward, and resolves in—heaven itself.

Why do that review? Because today we *continue* that train of thought. There are ditches for those that study this text but fail to recall where and what the author's been discussing.

So, having zoomed out, we zoom back in to connect it more closely to the nearer context. If a few weeks back we considered “A Better Covenant,” from Hebrews 8, and last week we considered, “The Blood that Cleanses,” from Hebrews 9, today the author connects *both* in what we might call, “The Better Blood of the Covenant.”

These are—no doubt—detailed descriptions of religious practices from thousands of years ago in a place thousands of miles away. But they are also soaring realities—life transforming gospel truths.<sup>2</sup> And in case you find that last bit improbable, let me lean into it and make it *seemingly* more so, by emphasizing what this passage emphasizes: blood. What we discuss today might be something your co-workers and your neighbors would find morbid. Yet the author of Hebrews declares—without equivocation—that a bloody death is that which stands at the center of human history, and at the center of your hope.

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<sup>1</sup> To use Chris's phrase from a few weeks back.

<sup>2</sup> This week I've had three different people—of three different generations—tell me something along these lines, “If I could only remember these truths—somehow *keep* them at the forefront of my mind—I could better handle everything else that's being thrown at me.”

## 1. Blood and the Mediator of the Covenant (v. 15a; v. 15b)

We ended last week considering the blood of Christ, the degree to which it *was* and *is* better than the blood of goats, calves, and bulls. Verse 13: **For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?**

You can hear the lesser to greater argument. If the blood of animals did *that*, what might the blood of the One who is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature do? We noted how the repeated emphasis in chapters 1-8 on the person of Christ, in some sense, led us to that moment in verse 14. The better, the *perfect*, High Priest entered the holy of holies and offered Himself.

Which leads us to verse 15. In one sense *this* is the climax of verses 11–14: **For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant.** So, again, he mentioned a new and better covenant in chapter 8. He's begun to discuss blood in chapter 9. Now he brings those two ideas *together*. And he does so by saying Christ is the mediator of this new covenant.

I find helpful Al Mohler's assertion, "Mediator is a dangerous word for many of us because we think we know what it means."<sup>3</sup> By that, he means we bring our *own* understanding of the word to the Scriptures. In our local news, FedEx pilots have been in mediation. We hear this term often. In our day, a mediator gets two opposing sides together and tries to effect something of a compromise. And of course, not just with businesses, this can be true with relationships. Maybe you've informally functioned in a few of these situations, "Did you hear what she just said?" "If I might gently suggest that you both are talking right past one another." If both parties need to move toward one another, the mediator helps them get there.

To state it bluntly, that's not *at all* what mediator means here. There aren't two guilty parties working toward a middle ground. In this covenant there's only *one* party that's guilty. And if the Son is the Mediator, He didn't come to effect a compromise. In fact, He agreed with the Father concerning our sin. He agreed that we were guilty. Because of that, He agreed that *we* deserved the infinite outpouring of God's wrath.

To understand this mediation, we need to be reminded what it is He mediates. He's the mediator of a **new covenant**. And not unlike mediator, we might carry our own ideas of a covenant into this passage. I'm not going to repeat everything I said in chapter 8, but what's described here likely reflects covenants enacted in the Ancient Near East. They were typically *not* made between equals. The greater king would offer his protection and blessing. The lesser would pledge loyalty.

The covenant itself would include various aspects, listing the parties involved, what the greater had done to deserve loyalty, the stipulations of the covenant itself, and then—importantly for today—it would conclude with a list of blessings should the covenant be kept, and a list of curses should it be broken.<sup>4</sup>

Though there are numerous covenants in the Bible,<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 8 focused on, and contrasted, two of them: the Mosaic and the New. We noted some of the New Covenant's better promises in chapter 8, a new *person* (8:10), a new *people* (8:11), and a new provision (8:12).

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<sup>3</sup> Al Mohler, *Hebrews*, CCE, 136.

<sup>4</sup> See R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths*, 75; See also Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*, 56ff.

<sup>5</sup> Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and depending on who you ask, a covenant of works, a covenant of grace, a covenant of redemption. If you're asking *me*, I believe all those are in the Bible.

The blood we considered last week is the essence of the new and better provision. It is the *means* by which all those promises come about. That's what verse 15 says: **For this reason** (Christ's blood—His sacrificial, substitutionary death) He is the **mediator of a new covenant**.

How else do we know that? It's what verse 15 goes on to say, **so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions**. A death took place for the redemption of transgressions. What transgressions did this include? I zoomed out in the introduction. Hear how the author of Hebrews zooms out in verse 15: **since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant**.

By first covenant, he means the *first* one given to Israel as a nation,<sup>6</sup> the Mosaic covenant. Again, to grasp what he's saying it might be helpful to quickly be reminded of the ones to whom he wrote. He's writing Jewish Christians, those that grew up in that ecosystem of law, tabernacle, and sacrifices. They knew, had memorized, much of the Mosaic Covenant. They knew what it required, its blessings and curses. And they knew the transgressions of the people that lived under it.

## 2. Blood and a Broken Covenant (vv. 16–17)

I didn't see this one coming, but if you want to know one of the hardest interpretive decisions I've had to make in Hebrews thus far, I'd have to include verses 16 and 17. You can probably see the issue in two seconds if you're reading from an ESV today. When I read the passage earlier from the NASB, you heard me say "covenant" when you read "will" in those verses.

I'm not aiming to bore you anymore than I already have, but some of the reason for the difference is that in the Greek world at the time—*outside* the Bible—this word was sometimes translated "will." By that, they don't mean the volitional aspect of our being, your will to choose, etc. Instead, they mean the will you sit with an attorney and write concerning your possessions. In the Greek world, the word was translated that way. But it has a range of meaning. Though that's the way the world used that term, whenever that word is used in the Scriptures—Greek Old or New Testament—it's translated "covenant."<sup>7</sup>

Translations disagree. Commentators do as well, though I should say *not* with rancor.<sup>8</sup> They make their case and then say, "But I could see the other side too." That's my posture as well. Some of that is because it's not *only* that picking the word is challenging, so is the argument surrounding the word. Again: *life transforming gospel truths communicated via detailed descriptions of religious practices from thousands of years ago in a place thousands of miles away*.

Though I deeply respect those that choose "will," I prefer "covenant" for a few reasons. First, as I said, the same word used throughout Hebrews and the rest of the New Testament is translated "covenant." That's to look broadly. Secondly, if we look at the *nearer* context, that's clearly what it meant in chapter 8. There's no Mosaic "will." Third, I find it hard to believe the author would—again using the *same* word—switch from "covenant" in verse 15 to "will" in verses 16 and 17 and then back to "covenant" in verse 18.<sup>9</sup>

So, what's the sense of these two verses? In verse 15 the author mentioned a death taking place for the redemption of the transgressions committed under the first covenant. To me, the covenant mentioned in verse 15, (which will *also* be the focus of verses 18–22)—those bookends—

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<sup>6</sup> A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 442.

<sup>7</sup> To further compound the problem, if we were to have a Venn diagram with those two words, we could certainly find some overlap.

<sup>8</sup> For "will," see this esteemed list: Leon Morris, Tom Schreiner, Luke Johnson, Harold Attridge, and John Owen. For "covenant," see this esteemed list: Peter O'Brien, Gareth Cockerill, Dana Harris, George Guthrie, and Charles Spurgeon.

<sup>9</sup> Again, I respect the other view. I think I can articulate it. I *almost* could preach it. If you'd like to discuss the nuances further, I'm glad to.

inform us concerning *which* covenant he's primarily referring to in the verses between (16 and 17). If that's the case, verses 16 and 17 are *primarily* referring to that same covenant—the Mosaic covenant—and more specifically to its having been broken.<sup>10</sup> That's the covenant, and the situation, verse 16 primarily speaks of: **For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it.**

There's a good bit here to unpack.<sup>11</sup> But my aim is to focus upon what's *most* important for understanding the overall point. First, “the one who made it,” refers to Israel's role in that first covenant.<sup>12</sup> A covenant, again, is an agreement between *two* parties. Though God initiated it, Israel was that other party.<sup>13</sup>

In that covenant there were stipulations, including blessings for those that kept it and curses for those that didn't. Verse 15 already noted that there were transgressions **committed under the first covenant.** You don't have to read much of the Old Testament to know that the people of God did not earn the blessings of the covenant. They did not keep its stipulations. Therefore, they'd earned something else.

Concerning this broken covenant, something of necessity must happen for it to be valid (v. 17). What is that something of necessity? Death. Again, as we mentioned last week, blood isn't a skinned knee; blood means death. Yet, I should point out that in this verse there's some intentional ambiguity. It doesn't say, precisely, *who* must die. It's only that a death in relation to the covenant maker—and covenant breaker—must be endured.<sup>14</sup>

Verse 17 continues to speak of this. Since I picked on the ESV earlier, I do think it's translation of this verse is a bit clearer, especially if we insert “covenant” instead of “will.” If we do that, the ESV reads like this: **for a covenant takes effect only at death.**<sup>15</sup> It could be translated, literally, “for a covenant upon corpses is valid.”<sup>16</sup> Or to say it yet another way, if the covenant agreed to had particular *blessings* for its keeping, and particular *curses* for its breaking, then that covenant is not in force *until* it is enforced.<sup>17</sup> That's how verse 17 ends: **for it is never in force while the one who made it lives.**

So, what were these corpses—*related* to the covenant maker (Israel)—in that broken covenant? Some would say the blood of goats and bulls and calves. To a degree, I'd agree. I think it's that, and more than that.

In one sense, he's backing up a bit. He's *already* shown us the earthly tabernacle before pointing us to the one it pointed to. He's also *already* shown us the earthly priests before pointing us to the One they pointed to. And since he's moved now to the idea of sacrifice, he's using vivid language to describe how central blood—*corpses* even—were to the idea of covenant. He'll continue this in verses 18–22. This is one reason why O. Palmer Robertson called a covenant not merely a bond, but “a bond in blood, sovereignly administered.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Peter O'Brien, *Hebrews*, PNTC, 331.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Mounce, who wrote one of the best-selling Greek grammars of all time, calls the Greek in these verses “convoluted” here: <https://www.billmounce.com/monday-with-mounce/covenants-and-wills-heb-9-16-17>

<sup>12</sup> O'Brien, *God has Spoken in His Son*, NSBT, 87; Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 234; Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 406.

<sup>13</sup> Some would call the Mosaic covenant a bilateral, rather than a unilateral, covenant.

<sup>14</sup> O'Brien, 331.

<sup>15</sup> The NASB adds when men are dead. But there is nothing in the Greek that requires that which dies to be a person. See Mounce: <https://www.billmounce.com/monday-with-mounce/covenants-and-wills-heb-9-16-17>

<sup>16</sup> Διαθήκη (covenant) γὰρ (for) ἐπὶ (upon) νεκροῖς (corpses) βεβαία (valid)

<sup>17</sup> Cockerill, 407.

<sup>18</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 4ff.

Again, I don't want to be morbid, but just like the story of Noah wasn't actually full of pastels, obedient giraffes, and smiling faces, the sacrificial system wasn't PG-13. Verses 16 and 17 describe what must be done in the case of this broken covenant. Not in the fullest sense—of course—but *in an important sense*—blood pictured the satisfaction of the demands of the Old Covenant.

Verses 16 and 17 are showing us some degree of continuity between what happened concerning dealing with sins in the Old Covenant and the better promises of the better covenant assured in verse 15. However, to be clear, we can't stop at verses 16–17.

### 3. Blood at a Covenant's Inauguration (vv. 18–22)

Again, to think in terms of covenant *necessitates* thinking in terms of blood. The next section shows us that though blood pictured satisfying *some* degree of the demands in the Old Covenant, it *also* was center stage in the ritual that inaugurated that covenant. One man wrote, “Verse 18 moves from the fate of those who broke the Sinai Covenant to the anticipation of that fate foreshadowed by its inauguration.”<sup>19</sup>

Verse 18: **Therefore, even the first covenant was not inaugurated without blood.** Another reason I prefer “covenant” over “will” is because of verse 18's **Therefore**.<sup>20</sup> Read it with “will” instead and see if “therefore” makes sense. Regardless, it's clear the author's trying to make sure that we tie blood to covenant, showing us how the Mosaic covenant *began*.

Referring back to Exodus 24, he writes in verse 19: **For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people.** Is there more *here* than what was in Exodus 24? Yes, like he did with the Day of Atonement in verses 11-14, he appears to conflate that particular instance with other purification rites.<sup>21</sup>

Why might he do that? As mentioned before, he's likely endeavoring to show us that not one single sacrifice—by itself—communicated *all* that was to come. That's why there's more than one chapter in the Old Testament. That's why there's more than one sacrifice. Together—*collectively*—they communicate and anticipate something better ahead.<sup>22</sup>

But what is it that we see in verse 19? When that first covenant was being inaugurated, blood was *everywhere*. The altar, the book within the altar,<sup>23</sup> *even the people* had blood sprinkled on them. There's nothing casual about this covenant. By this ritual the curses of disobeying were clear. It bound the people, on pain of death, to obey the stipulations of the covenant now written in the book.<sup>24</sup> Verse 20 communicates the gravity, loosely quoting Moses in Exodus 24. In that passage, with blood all over the place, Moses declares, **Behold, the blood of the covenant** (Ex. 24:8). Here in verse 20, it's, **This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you.**

Has he connected covenant and blood yet? I would think so. But he's not finished. Verse 21: **And in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood.** This isn't a skinned knee. No, here, blood is death. At the inauguration of the covenant, it's *everywhere*.

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<sup>19</sup> Cockerill, 406.

<sup>20</sup> It's not as clear how verse 18 would follow the logic of verse 17, as in, “the will goes into effect only after the person's death. That is why (therefore) even the first covenant was not inaugurated without blood.” Again, see Mounce.

<sup>21</sup> Harris, 236.

<sup>22</sup> Cockerill, 296; William Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 239; Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 272

<sup>23</sup> Harris, 236.

<sup>24</sup> Cockerill, 408.

And this is not only at the inauguration, it's essential to the key aspects of it. Verse 22: **And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.** The law gave God's people categories concerning what was to come. Verse 22 mentions two key aspects. First, without blood, there is no forgiveness. Secondly, blood cleanses.

#### 4. Blood and the Blessings of the New Covenant (v. 15c)

Verse 15 is the central verse of this section, with verses 11–14 building to it, and verses 16–22 being something of a parenthetical explanation of it.<sup>25</sup> So, with the parenthetical explanation in mind—blood being *essential* to the idea of covenant, inaugurating it and picturing satisfaction of a broken one—we can read again verse 15: **For this reason, He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the old covenant.**

What we might have found to be ambiguous in verse 16 is crystal clear here. This Mediator didn't come to effect a compromise. He agreed with the Father concerning our sin and guilt. He agreed that *we* deserved the infinite outpouring of God's wrath.

Did those Old Testament sacrifices, did the corpse upon corpse, accomplish this? Did it redeem? No, instead, v. 15, **a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the old covenant.** Though the Old Covenant was a bloody one, all those priests in temples bringing sacrifice after sacrifice were shadows, copies, and patterns of that which was to come. When the blood of the Son would satisfy *all* that God demanded.<sup>26</sup> When the sins of the people of God, in both Old and New Covenant, were forgiven in His once-for-all atonement.<sup>27</sup>

This covenant was kept.<sup>28</sup> It was kept by *Him*. And it was kept by Him for *us*.

And what does a covenant that's *kept* promise? Blessing. Which is what the end of verse 15 describes: **since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.**

As we've noted, the entire book of Hebrews opens up to the degree we keep front and center the ascension of Christ to God's right hand. *Where* He is matters. But not *only* because He is there. But because of what He's doing there, and what He intends to do in the future.<sup>29</sup> He entered the greater and more perfect tabernacle—heaven itself—so that He might *also* bring sons and daughters to glory (Heb. 2:9–10). He ascended so that we might too.<sup>30</sup>

As mediator of this new and better covenant, He not only died to end the enmity, He not only died to cleanse within, He mediates to His people that which belongs to Him.<sup>31</sup> That means one

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<sup>25</sup> Barry Joslin, "Christ Bore the Sins of Many: Substitution and the Atonement in Hebrews," in *SBJT*, (Summer 2007), 86.

<sup>26</sup> "The retroactive efficiency of the New Covenant is one of the main reasons why many Particular Baptists equated the covenant of grace with the New Covenant," Pascal Denault: <https://founders.org/articles/from-the-covenant-of-works-to-the-covenant-of-grace/>

<sup>27</sup> Joslin, 87.

<sup>28</sup> <https://founders.org/articles/the-confession-of-1689-and-covenant-theology/>

<sup>29</sup> Recall what the angels said in Acts 1. In the same way you saw Him leave, He will return (Acts 1:9–11).

<sup>30</sup> Having been made perfect, the Father welcomed Him. Because what He did, He did in the flesh—in our place—the Father welcomes us as well.

<sup>31</sup> See Samuel Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ*, 181. Thanks to Daniel Thompson for pointing me to this resource.

day we'll receive this promise of an eternal inheritance. His blood assures it. He will be our God; and we will be His people (Heb. 8:10).

## Conclusion

I know this sermon on the blood of the covenant contained a lot of information. But I'm going to ask Spurgeon to help us grasp the significance of it, by quoting the way he speaks of both its effectiveness and its purpose. Of its effectiveness, he writes, "Jesus Christ's blood was the payment of His part of the covenant; and when He shed it, the covenant stood firm as the everlasting hills, and the throne of God Himself is not more sure than is the covenant of grace; and mark you, that covenant is not sure *merely* in its great outlines, but sure also in all its details. Every soul whose name was in that covenant must be saved. Unless God can undeify Himself, every soul that Christ died for He will have."

So, while these are *indeed* truths communicated via detailed descriptions of religious practices from thousands of years ago in a place thousands of miles away, they are life transforming ones—soaring realities. Hear what Spurgeon writes next, "You will ask, 'What is the purpose of this doctrine?' (covenants) Its purpose is this—to you who have believed in Jesus, covenant mercies are sure, not because of your frames and feelings, but because of the precious blood of Jesus. Yesterday you were happy, and today you are downcast. Well, but the covenant has not changed. Tomorrow you may be in the very depths of despair, while today you are singing upon the top of the mountain; but the covenant will not alter. That transaction was not made by you, and cannot be unmade by you. . . There it stands fast and settled."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "The Blood of the Testament," in *The Treasury of the Bible*, Vol. 4, 121.