

The Blood of the New Covenant Maundy Thursday, 2021

On the night He was betrayed, hours before His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus shared a final Passover meal with His disciples. Passover was the most important meal of the year for God's people, having been instituted almost 1500 years earlier by Moses as God delivered His people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. Passover was a family meal, eaten by households, and Jesus shared this meal with His new spiritual family, His disciples.

At the Passover meal, four cups of wine were presented and drunk, each symbolizing one of the four "I will . . ." statements of God in Exodus 6:6-7

Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (Exodus 6:6-7 ESV)

The third cup, which is the cup drunk after dinner and is almost certainly the cup Jesus is using here, is known as "the cup of redemption" as it is associated with the third "I will . . ." statement of God, "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm."

And now listen to how Matthew and Luke record what Jesus said to His disciples on that night:

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." – Matthew 26:26-29, ESV

¹⁴ And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. ¹⁸ For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹ And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. – Luke 22:14-20, ESV

The disciples would have already associated this cup with redemption, and so Jesus is announcing a new redemption, one which would accomplish what the Exodus from Egypt could not accomplish. But in Matthew and Luke, we read two other things Jesus said about the cup of the Lord's Supper, which He was instituting:

Matthew records that Jesus said, "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Luke records that Jesus said, *“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood”*

So, these new words Jesus spoke to His disciples on that Thursday evening almost 2,000 years ago had great significance for the disciples, but would have still left them with a number of questions. For us, these words raise the same questions and maybe more:

1. What is a covenant and why does it involve the pouring out of blood?
2. What is “the blood of the covenant”?
3. What is the “new covenant” Jesus speaks of being in His blood?
4. How does Jesus pouring out His blood secure forgiveness of sins for many?
5. What are the benefits and blessings we receive from this new covenant poured out in Jesus’ blood, and how do we receive them?
6. How does all of this connect to our regular observance of the Lord’s Supper?

I. First, what is a covenant?

A covenant is a binding relational agreement, a solemn relationship based on promise and obligation.

In the Old Testament, the term for covenant usually meant an agreement made between two rulers or two kings, something like a peace treaty or an alliance. It was a very solemn agreement and was usually sealed in blood. In fact, the Hebrews expression “to make a covenant” literally means “to cut a covenant.” Some sort of sacrifice or shedding of blood was required to “seal the deal” and this had the effect of a self-maledictory oath.

Now you all know what a self-maledictory oath is, right? Of course you do. You all made them when you were a kid, “Cross my heart, hope to die. Stick a needle in my eye.” When you attach this to a promise or a swearing of truth-telling, you are saying that if you are lying, you hope to die and the other person has the right to stick a needle in your eye.

The idea behind covenant oaths in Biblical times is the same but taken much more seriously. The clearest picture we see of this is in Genesis 15 when God makes a covenant with Abraham. God comes and makes a promise to Abraham: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” Abram questions how God can keep His promise, since Abram has no son and a foreigner, Eliezer of Damascus, will be his heir. How can God greatly reward Abram is Abram will soon be dead and everything he owns will be left to a foreigner?

God makes His promise sure by asking Abram to take a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove and a pigeon and to cut the larger animals in half and make a path between them and then to take the two birds a lay them on either side of the path. These severed animals represent the consequences of a broken covenant. God has made a covenant with Abraham, a promise to be his God and to reward him greatly through his offspring. The severed animals represent the consequences that would come if the covenant God made with His people would be broken. We’ll talk more about this later and we’ll see what very unusual thing God does in a few minutes . . .

In the New Testament, the word translated “covenant” is the word often used for a last will or testament. This is why the KJV translates Jesus’ words as “new testament in my blood” and yes, that’s where we get our terms “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” They could also be expressed as “Old Covenant”

and “New Covenant.” Now a last will and testament has two distinct features which are relevant to us and which are highlighted in Hebrews 9:

First of all, unlike a peace treaty or political alliance, a will is unilateral, one-sided. The person with the estate, the rich guy, gets to decide by himself who will receive his inheritance. Interestingly, where God promises Abram “a great reward” the New Testament often uses the term “inheritance” to refer to the reward of the believer.

The second truth about a will is that the one who makes it has to die before it can be put into effect. This is what Hebrews 9:16-18 says, “*For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood . . .*”

So that’s the basic Bible picture of a covenant: a solemn relationship established and guaranteed by a self-maledictory oath, requiring death if the covenant is broken, and a last will and testament guaranteeing an inheritance for whomever the one who makes the will decides and which takes effect with the death of the one who makes the will.

2. What is “the blood of the covenant”?

The exact phrase “the blood of the covenant” is found in Exodus 24:4-8:

And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. ⁶ And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” ⁸ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.” (ESV)

Notice that the blood of the covenant comes from the sacrifices that were made and that Moses sprinkled half of the blood against the altar of God and then he took the other half of the blood and threw it on the people. The blood of the covenant is the blood of a sacrifice that makes atonement for sin and reconciles God to His people by doing two things – it does something for God and it does something for us, His people. It appeases the wrath of God – we call this propitiation – and it covers and cleanses our sin – we call this expiation.

Now, while Moses did this action with animal blood in Exodus 24, Jesus is telling us that the real blood of the covenant is His blood, poured out in loving self-sacrifice on the cross. Listen to how Hebrews 10 takes us from the blood of the Old Covenant to the better blood of Jesus:

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

⁵ *Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,*

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
 but a body have you prepared for me;
⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings
 you have taken no pleasure.
⁷ Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
 as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

⁸ When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ^[b] had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. – Hebrews 10:1-14, ESV

3. What is the “new covenant” Jesus speaks of being in His blood?

Now, when Jesus said that the cup was the new covenant in His blood, the disciples would have known exactly what passage of Scripture He had in mind, for the phrase “new covenant” is only found in one place in the Old Testament, and it was a well-known passage that was much discussed in Jesus’ day, Jeremiah 31 -

¹ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

– Jeremiah 31:31-34, ESV

Jesus declared that the sacrifice He was about to make on the cross would bring the long-promised and much-anticipated new covenant into reality. The problem with the Old Covenant is that it could be broken by the sin of the people.

I love how literal small children can be. When Andrew was about four years old or so, we were talking one day about his sin and about how he had broken God’s law. Andrew was concerned that he had broken God’s law. We prayed together, and he asked for forgiveness and then soon went back to playing. Later, he come up to me and said, “Daddy, is God going to be able to fix His law?” Confused, I shook my head and said, “What?” He repeated his question, this time with clarification, “Daddy, is God going to be able to fix His law since I brokeded it.” I was taken aback by his question at the time and I’m not sure what I said to him, but now I realize that Andrew was exactly right. He understood more than he knew.

By our sin, we break God's covenant with us. He has promised to be our God and to have us as His people, but He is holy and we are sinful. When we break His law, we disqualify ourselves from being His holy people, His chosen nation, and so we break His covenant. The law is broken. This was symbolized by the stone tablets on Sinai which Moses threw down and broke in the face of the people's sinful rebellion. Well, we are all golden calf makers in our own way; we are all rebels and so we have all broken God's law. **Is God able to fix His law? Yes! He fixes His law in the new covenant in Jesus.**

The new covenant cannot be broken, for it is perfectly and unalterably fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The New Covenant is in His blood. The blood of animals could not cleanse the people, and the obedience of the people could not fulfill their covenant obligations.

4. How does Jesus pouring out His blood secure forgiveness of sins for many? In other words, how does the blood of Jesus make the New Covenant and its blessings a reality for His people?

Well, it's not just the shed blood of Jesus, but it is also His perfect and sinless obedience. Before Hebrews teaches us about His better blood sacrifice making Him the mediator of the new covenant in Hebrews 8-10, it tells us about Jesus' humble obedience:

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him – Hebrews 5:7-9, ESV

So, Jesus' perfect obedience made Him the perfect mediator, perfect sacrifice, and the source of eternal salvation for all of His own. He fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the Law in His life before He took our sins on Himself in His death. This is what makes His death so powerful, as well as the fact that He is the Son of God, whose life is of infinite value and thus able to pay for all of the sins of all of God's people for all time.

5. What are the benefits and blessings we receive from this new covenant poured out in Jesus' blood, and how do we receive them?

Jeremiah 31 lists four benefits that flow from the new covenant:

1. God's Law written on our hearts instead of on tablets of stone.
2. God taking us to be His people and committing to being our God forever.
3. Everyone having personal knowledge of God.
4. Complete forgiveness of sin, so that God will not remember our sins against us anymore.

By the Holy Spirit's work in applying the work of Christ to our hearts by grace, the new covenant is profoundly internally and transformative. We learn to delight in the law of God in our hearts and to hate sin; even though we still sin, we hate our sin and we love God's good law. We are adopted forever, never to be rejected or cast off, because all of the requirements of righteousness have been fulfilled by Jesus and all of our sin has been taken away forever. Through the Holy Spirit's work, we each know God personally, and He knows us. And our sins are not counted against us anymore.

Hebrews 10 adds two wonderful phrases to these promises to summarize the benefits of the New Covenant:

“we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” – v. 10

“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” – v. 14

So, how do we receive these benefits? By faith alone in Christ alone. What does this mean? By receiving and resting on Jesus alone as our only righteousness, forgiveness, peace with God, and perfect redemption, we are united to Him by faith and, through Him as the covenant mediator, we share in all of the blessings and benefits of the new covenant. All we need is Jesus. All the covenant blessings are found in Him alone.

And so this leads us to our final question:

6. How does all of this connect to our regular observance of the Lord’s Supper?

Well, whenever we take the Lord’s Supper, we eat bread and we drink wine. When we eat bread, which is the most basic and essential staple of life in the ancient world, we are saying that we would be dead without Jesus. He is our life, our righteousness, our peace. And when we drink the wine, we are saying that we need the blood of Jesus applied to our souls to cleanse us and give us true forgiveness.

Taking the Lord’s Supper is an act of faith, another way we share in Christ and feast our souls on Him by faith. It is a living demonstration of our ongoing hunger and thirst, our ongoing need for Jesus. Eating by faith is saying, “Jesus, I need You. I would be guilty and dead without You.”