

Innocent of the Blood

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In last week's lesson we looked at a passage from Acts 20 and focused on the word shrink there. In this passage Paul connects this idea of not shrinking back with the statement '*I am innocent of the blood of all*'. This morning our focus will be on his statement about the blood. Here is that reference from last week's lesson -

Acts 20

In Acts chapter 20 we have a scene where Paul is addressing the Elders at Ephesus for the last time and where he says - "*how I did not **shrink** from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house,*" and Paul also states "*Therefore I testify to you this day that **I am innocent of the blood of all**, for I did not **shrink** from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.*" In both cases the word translated as shrink is the Greek word *hupostellō* pronounced hoop-os-tel'-lo meaning to draw in or back or conceal. As in not to tell something out of fear.

Wasn't it Saul, later known as Paul, who persecuted Christians as recorded in Acts 26:9-12 where we see Paul before King Agrippa -

"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities."

So what is Paul referring to in the statement from Acts 20 when he says '*I am innocent of the blood of all*' ?

When Paul was confronted by the Lord on the road to Damascus he was told who he was really persecuting - Acts 9:3-5 -

*"As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, **why do you persecute me?**" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,**" he replied."*

It is important to note that in Paul's statement from Acts 20 that he connects the idea of being 'innocent of the blood' with the idea that he did not fail to do something. That being '*declaring to you the whole counsel of God.*' This is a clue that leads us to a passage found in the book of Ezekiel chapter 3 to better understand Paul's meaning.

But before looking at that scene in Ezekiel let us consider the circumstance leading up to chapter 3 of that book. For that we turn to the book of Jeremiah.

In Jeremiah 25:1-11 the reigning king of Judah is Jehoiakim who reigned from 609-599BC. And as you recall Babylon captured Jerusalem and its inhabitants in 586BC. Jeremiah's message therefore is being spoken to the very generation of Israelites who would experience what the prophet had to say here. Jeremiah tells the people of Israel that God wants good for you but you did not listen to God, so you will go into captivity for 70 years.

Then while they are in captivity God sends the Prophet/Watchman Ezekiel to speak to those captive in Babylon. The very captivity Jeremiah had warned them of just a few years before. Here is that message from God through Ezekiel.

*“And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth. He then said to me: “Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them. You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and strange language, but to the people of Israel— not to many peoples of obscure speech and strange language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. **But the people of Israel are not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me**, for all the Israelites are hardened and obstinate. But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people.” And he said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says,’ whether they listen or fail to listen.” Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rumbling sound as the glory of the Lord rose from the place where it was standing. It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against each other and the sound of the wheels beside them, a loud rumbling sound. The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord on me. I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Aviv near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days—deeply distressed. At the end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. **When I say to a wicked person, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their life, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood.** But if you do warn the wicked person and they do not turn from their wickedness or from their evil ways, they will die for their sin; but you will have saved yourself. **“Again, when a righteous person turns from their righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before them, they will die. Since you did not warn them, they will die for their sin. The righteous things that person did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for their blood.** But if you do warn the righteous person not to sin and they do not sin, they will surely live because they took warning, and you will have saved yourself.”*

Eat this scroll - we could say God told Ezekiel to eat these words literally.

Note this was called a warning from God.

And if you warn them you will not be accountable of their blood, but if you fail to tell them you are accountable of their blood.

But shouldn't they have already known as God's chosen people about things that would make them accountable of the blood ? Yes they should - God told them through Moses -

Leviticus 17:1-14 *“The Lord said to Moses, “Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites and say to them: ‘This is what the Lord has commanded: Any Israelite who sacrifices an ox, a lamb or a goat in the camp or outside of it instead of bringing it to the entrance to the*

tent of meeting to present it as an offering to the Lord in front of the tabernacle of the Lord— **that person shall be considered guilty of bloodshed**; they have shed blood and must be cut off from their people. This is so the Israelites will bring to the Lord the sacrifices they are now making in the open fields. They must bring them to the priest, that is, to the Lord, at the entrance to the tent of meeting and sacrifice them as fellowship offerings. The priest is to splash the blood against the altar of the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting and burn the fat as an aroma pleasing to the Lord. They must no longer offer any of their sacrifices to the goat idols to whom they prostitute themselves. This is to be a lasting ordinance for them and for the generations to come.’ “Say to them: ‘Any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance to the tent of meeting to sacrifice it to the Lord must be cut off from the people of Israel. “I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from the people. **For the life of a creature is in the blood**, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; **it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life**. Therefore I say to the Israelites, “None of you may eat blood, nor may any foreigner residing among you eat blood.” “Any Israelite or any foreigner residing among you who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood and cover it with earth, **because the life of every creature is its blood**. That is why I have said to the Israelites, “You must not eat the blood of any creature, **because the life of every creature is its blood**; anyone who eats it must be cut off.”

This warning about the blood was repeated in Deuteronomy 12 and it also appears in the New Testament in Acts 15:29 where this prohibition was given by the Jerusalem Council for Gentile believers to observe as follows - “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.”

God emphasized the Israelites' need to sacrifice the animals at the tent of meeting inside the camp of the Israelites so the practice of sacrificing animals to demons outside the camp would cease. The blood of the sacrifice was used for atonement and pointed to the blood that Christ would shed for the sins of the world as described in Romans 3:21-26 **“But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.** This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the **shedding of his blood**— to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

And

Hebrews 10:1-18 “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me;

*with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll— I have come to do your will, my God.'” First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them” —though they were offered in accordance with the law. Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy **through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all**. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” Then he adds: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.”*

Not only was the act of eating blood associated with pagan rituals, but it displayed a disrespect for the sanctity of life. Honoring the life that God gave mankind and animals is intrinsically linked to refraining from eating its blood. When God gave animals to people as food, He said, *"Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image'"* (Genesis 9:3-6). Any person or animal who murdered a human was to be killed. Because humans bear the image of God, to unjustly take a human life is unconscionable. Though animals are not made in God's image and can be consumed, eating an animal's blood disrespects the principle of the sanctity of life as well as the sacrificial nature of blood.

Blood is an essential element in living, both physically and spiritually. Just as a person without blood cannot live, so also can a person's sins not be forgiven without the shedding of blood Hebrews 9:22 tells us.

“In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

As Christians we cannot help but see when reading Leviticus and Deuteronomy that in the worship services under the Law blood was sprinkled everywhere, and on nearly everything. At first this can seem somewhat strange to us. That is until we begin to see what that sprinkling represents.

Romans 6:23 tell us that "the wages of sin is death." In the Mosaic law, God foreshadowed the payment He would make for sin. An animal's death was used as a substitute to atone for sin. Sacrifices occurred throughout the year. Annually, on the Day of Atonement, the blood of a bull would be sprinkled on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant (Leviticus 16:14), and the blood of a goat would be sprinkled over the mercy seat and in front of it (Leviticus 16:15). This was to "make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins" (Leviticus 16:16). The blood of the bull and goat would also be put on the horns of the altar and sprinkled on it to "cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel" (Leviticus 16:18–19). When the priests were first consecrated to serve, they, too, were sprinkled with blood (Exodus 29:21).

And as we read earlier all of this was but a shadow of the good things to come in Christ.

The night before His death on the cross, "Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, **for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins**" (Matthew 26:26–28).

His death on the cross—His "shedding of blood"—made atonement for our sins. His resurrection affirmed His sacrifice and the reality of new life in Him. Jesus' blood ransomed us from spiritual death and ushered us into spiritual life by God's grace through faith as explained in Ephesians 2:1-10 - *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

And 1st John 2:1-2

"My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."

This morning are you among those who have been washed by the Savior's blood? And if you have, are you among those who are not shrinking from telling others about the whole counsel of God? Are you innocent of the blood...