

THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT



FROM THE PSALMS

“Hear, O my people, while I admonish you! O Israel, if you would but listen to me!

There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not bow down to a foreign god. I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.”

—Psalm 81:8–10

FROM THE WRITINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

“But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.”

—Hebrews 8:6–7

FROM THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

“After the patriarchs, God formed Israel as his people by freeing them from slavery in Egypt. He established with them the covenant of Mount Sinai and, through Moses, gave them his law so that they would recognize him and serve him as the one living and true God, the provident Father and just judge, and so that they would look for the promised Savior.”

—CCC, 62

Note: All scripture citations are in the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted

THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT

INTRODUCTION

God calls Israel his “treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5) and invites the Israelites into a covenant relationship. A covenant binds two people (or groups of people) as kin, or family. God swears to be Israel’s God. He swears to protect his people and guide them. In return, Israel swears to love and obey the Lord. Great happiness and blessing await the Israelites if they keep the covenant. Serious consequences await them if they break it. Understanding how this covenant is made will help us understand why Jesus sheds his blood on the Cross.

OPENING PRAYER:

Lord, open my mind to your word and bless me with the gift of understanding so I might come to know and love you better. Amen.

BACKGROUND

God delivers the Ten Commandments to Israel. These laws instruct his people how to be holy and happy. Israel pledges its obedience and swears to worship God alone. Following the custom of ancient cultures, the people seal the covenant by sacrificing an animal.

SCRIPTURE

Read Exodus 24:3–8

COMMENTARY

Moses sacrifices oxen to seal the covenant with God. He throws some of the blood on the altar (representing God) and he throws some of the blood on the people. This is the blood of the covenant and it symbolizes that God and Israel are bound together as family—they share blood.

The animal’s blood also signifies how serious the covenant is: they must keep the covenant as though their lives depended on it. Breaking a covenant involves grave consequences. If the Israelites are unfaithful to God, they agree to be subject to the penalty of death.

Not long after swearing this covenant, the Israelites break their word. They make a golden statue of an Egyptian god—the Golden Calf—

and they worship it. According to the terms of the covenant, they should die! Moses punishes some of the most unrepentant Israelites, but Israel as a whole does not receive the punishment it deserves. They owe God a debt for violating a covenant sworn with blood.

FULFILLMENT IN CHRIST

Jesus comes to pay back this debt by shedding his own blood on the cross. At the Last Supper, Jesus tells the Apostles that the blood he is pouring out for them is the “blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Jesus, a descendant of Israel, offers his own blood on Israel’s behalf. The blood of the broken covenant is paid back by Christ.

All humans are indebted to God because of sin. Because all humans owe the debt, no one prior to Christ could pay it back. When he becomes a man and suffers and dies for us, Jesus pays the debt of sin for us. Because Jesus is God, he has infinite power to pay back what we all owe. Through Christ, God shows mercy in a way that also satisfies justice.

IN THE LITURGY

At Mass, the breaking of the bread (Jesus’ Body) and the pouring-out of his blood are the sacramental expressions of what happens on the Cross. The Eucharist is the blood of the “new and everlasting covenant.” By receiving it, we are bonded to God as family even more perfectly than the Israelites were bonded to the Lord. Through the blood of Christ, we are united to God as family, as his true sons and daughters.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, thank you for paying the debt so that I can be forgiven from my sins. Increase my gratitude for this gift. Amen.

RESOLUTION

If you offend someone today, promptly ask for forgiveness and make restitution. Practice paying back your debt to others.

ANIMAL SACRIFICES



FROM THE PSALMS

“Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?
Offer to God a sacrifice of
thanksgiving, and perform
your vows to the Most High,
and call upon me in the day
of trouble; I will deliver
you, and you shall glorify
me.”

—Psalm 50:13–15

FROM THE WRITINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

“And every priest stands
daily at his service, offering
repeatedly the same
sacrifices, which can never
take away sins. But when
Christ had offered for all time
a single sacrifice for sins, he
sat down at the right hand of
God, waiting from that time
until his enemies should be
made a stool for his feet. For
by a single offering he has
perfected for all time those
who are being sanctified.”

—Hebrews 10:11–14

FROM THE *CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH*

“The coming of God's Son to
earth is an event of such
immensity that God willed to
prepare for it over centuries.

He makes everything
converge on Christ: all the
rituals and sacrifices, figures
and symbols of the "First
Covenant". He announces
him through the mouths of
the prophets who succeeded
one another in Israel.
Moreover, he awakens in the
hearts of the pagans a dim
expectation of this coming..”

—CCC, 522

ANIMAL SACRIFICES

INTRODUCTION

Why does God ask Israel to sacrifice animals? After Jesus comes, we do not worship the Lord by sacrificing animals. What changes from the Old Testament to the New? We will see how the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament prepare God's people to recognize the Cross as the perfect act of worship.

OPENING PRAYER:

Lord, open my mind to your word and bless me with the gift of understanding so I might come to know and love you better. Amen.

BACKGROUND

Many ancient cultures would worship their gods by offering animal sacrifice. These ceremonies would have been familiar to Israel. God teaches the Israelites to worship him through actions whose meaning they would already recognize.

Additionally, animal sacrifice is a visible reminder of the consequences of sin. Animals are valuable. Offering an animal, especially as a way to ask forgiveness for sin, is a tangible sign that sin is costly, messy, and deadly.

SCRIPTURE

Read Leviticus 4:1–7

COMMENTARY

Animal sacrifice provides the Israelites with a concrete way of making restitution to God for their sins. Without a way to express sorrow for their wrongdoing, Israel might fall into despair. The animal sacrifices—strange as they are to us—help the Israelites ask forgiveness, put their sins behind them, and move forward with a renewed effort to be faithful to God. Animal sacrifices show how God is a good and loving Father, mindful of what his people need to make progress in the spiritual life.

Different kinds of food are sacrificed in the liturgies of the Old Testament. Each day, the priest offers a grain offering (Leviticus 2, 6). As needed, the priest offers sin offerings (Leviticus 4, 6) or peace offerings of an animal (Leviticus 3, 7), usually a bull, ox, or goat. Other

offerings—such as the offering of thanksgiving—require bread and wine. Why so much food? Because many of the sacrifices were meant to be eaten by the priests or by the people (e.g. Exodus 24:3, Leviticus 5:11, 13). A portion is offered to God and a portion is eaten. This is a sign of communion. People who love each other eat from the same table.

FULFILLMENT IN CHRIST

The sacrifices of the Old Testament prepare us for Christ's death—the perfect sacrifice. Jesus' death restores the relationship between God and the human race once and for all.

Christ perfects all the Old Testament sacrifices. He establishes peace, he offers thanks, and shows how we can offer our lives daily to God through prayer and obedience. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus invests oil, water, bread, and wine with the power of healing and forgiveness. God directs Israel's liturgy in the Old Testament so his people can understand the meaning of Jesus' words and deeds in the New.

IN THE LITURGY

The Mass is a sacrifice—it is the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross re-presented for us under the appearance of bread and wine. The Mass is a sin offering, a peace offering, and an offering of thanksgiving. "Eucharist" comes from the Greek word for "thanksgiving." The Eucharist restores our peace with God and reunites us to him through sharing a sacred meal.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, thank you for the gifts of the liturgy and the sacraments so when I sin, my relationship with you can be restored. Amen.

RESOLUTION

Take on someone else's work. Pick up a toy for a sibling, do a chore for someone without being asked. Imitate Christ who pays a debt he did not owe.

THE SCAPEGOAT



FROM THE PSALMS

“Remember, O Lord, how your servants are mocked, and how I bear in my heart the insults of all the many nations, with which your enemies mock, O LORD, with which they mock the footsteps of your anointed.”

—Psalm 89:50–51

FROM THE WRITINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

—1 Peter 2:24

FROM THE *CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH*

“For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.’ By his obedience unto death, Jesus accomplished the substitution of the suffering Servant, who ‘makes himself an *offering for sin*’, when ‘he bore the sin of many’, and who ‘shall make many to be accounted righteous’, for ‘he shall bear their iniquities’. Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father.”

—CCC, 615

THE SCAPEGOAT¹

INTRODUCTION

On a special feast day each year, the Day of Atonement, God would forgive all the sins of his people. Each year, Israel would celebrate this feast by sacrificing something called a scapegoat. How does the Old Testament scapegoat prepare us to understand how our sins will be forgiven? We will find out after we pray.

OPENING PRAYER:

Lord, open my mind to your word and bless me with the gift of understanding so I might come to know and love you better. Amen.

BACKGROUND

On the Day of Atonement, the priests of Israel offer two goats to the Lord. They sprinkle the blood of the first goat on the altar of the Lord as a sign of sorrow for the sins of the Israelites. Our reading tells us what happens to the second goat.

SCRIPTURE

Read Leviticus 16:21–22

COMMENTARY

The second goat in the Day of Atonement ritual is called the “scapegoat.” Aaron, the high priest, confesses the sin of the people over the goat’s head. He puts the sins, or “iniquities,” of the people onto the goat. He then sends the goat away to a land that is “cut off”² from Israel. This symbolizes sin leaving God’s people.

Israel continually struggles with sin. Eventually their sins become so serious, God punishes them by *cutting them off* from the Promised Land. The Lord assures them this punishment will not last forever. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises to send a servant who will take on the burden of their sin. God will “lay on him the iniquity of us all.” He will be “cut off out of the land of the living” (Isaiah 53:6,8). This person

becomes known as the Suffering Servant. He will be the scapegoat for God’s people. He will pour out his soul to death, bear the sins of many, and make intercession for transgressors (see Isaiah 53:12).

FULFILLMENT IN CHRIST

Jesus is the Suffering Servant who bears our sins so we can be restored to God’s friendship. He is “cut off” so we can be brought back to communion with the Lord. Jesus tells his disciples that he has come into the world to give his life as a sacrifice, as a “ransom for many”. (Mark 10:45). When Jesus dies on the cross, he bears our iniquity; we are healed by his wounds.

IN THE LITURGY

The Old Testament is a blueprint for the sacrament of Reconciliation. The people of the Old Testament would confess their sins to the high priest who would transfer them to the scapegoat. In the New Covenant, we confess our sins to the priest who, through the Holy Spirit, transfers them to Christ on the cross. The priest absolves us of our sins “through the death and resurrection of [God’s] Son.”³ The Holy Spirit is not bound by time. Jesus has already borne the sins we commit today on the Cross. We access this forgiveness through the sacraments.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, thank you for suffering for me. Give me the grace to imitate you. Help me to be willing to put others before me. Amen.

RESOLUTION

If you are old enough to go to Confession and you have not gone yet this Lent, plan to go in the next week if you can. If you have not received this sacrament yet, spend time thinking about how you can love your family and God better and ask him forgiveness.

¹ This lesson is taken from a short course taught by Dr. Michael Barber on the book of Leviticus. The full course can be purchased here: <https://shortcourses.augustineinstitute.org>

² In some translations, the “cut-off” land is translated as “remote land.”

³ From the prayer of Absolution for the Sacrament of Reconciliation