

“Love in Black Light”

και χωρις αιματ-εκχυσιας ου γινεται αφεσις
John 6:53-58; Hebrews 9:22 ¹

I saw an ad some years ago that I’ve not been able to forget. The ad was for a carpet and upholstery cleaning company, and in order to show the need for their service, they showed a living room illuminated by “black” or ultraviolet light. As you can see from the picture on the screen, ultraviolet light reveals what, in this case, is cat urine that is otherwise invisible. Wouldn’t you want to hire a cleaner if this were your living room?

Another way I’ve seen “black light” used is to track wounded animals after dark. Like urine, blood also glows in ultraviolet light, allowing hunters to find hunted animals, who are often able to travel for some distance before succumbing to their wounds. It is the idea of a “trail of blood” that claims our attention tonight.

As you probably know, the Bible has a lot to say about blood. Blood first appears in Genesis 4:10, when the blood of Abel’s murder cries out to God. There are nearly 400 other mentions of blood, with the last mention in Revelation 19:13, where Jesus appears wearing a robe dipped in the blood of His own sacrifice, a sacrifice made once for all time.

In between those bookends, two other crucial passages are Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22, where we’re told that “*the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have appointed it to you to make atonement on the altar for your lives, since it **is the lifeblood that makes atonement.** . . . According to the law almost everything is purified with blood, and **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.**”*

In physical life as well as in theological truth, blood is life. For us, and for most creatures with which we’re familiar, where there is no blood, life is gone. Indeed, when death comes out of season—by a hunter’s bullet, in a slaughterhouse, in a car wreck, on a Roman cross—it’s hard to escape the impression that blood has a lot to do with it.

Blood is a hugely important liquid that is far more wonderful than most of us know. The adult human body contains approximately 5.3 quarts (c. 5 liters) of blood, and that blood makes up about 7-8% of our body weight.

A speck of blood the size of the typed letter ‘o’ contains 5,000,000 red cells, 300,000 platelets and 7,000 white cells. Sixty *thousand* miles of blood vessels link every living cell; even the blood vessels themselves are fed by blood vessels. Our blood highways narrow down to one-lane roads, then to bike paths, then to footpaths, until finally the red cells must turn sideways in order to edge through capillaries one-tenth the diameter of a human hair.

This pell-mell journey, even in its largest circuit, takes a mere *twenty seconds* (!), and an average red blood cell endures the cycle of loading and unloading oxygen and jostling through the body for a half million round trips over about four months. In one final journey, to the spleen, the battered cell is deconstructed by scavenger cells and recycled into new cells. Three hundred *billion* such red cells are replaced *every day*.²

While the average white cell lives only *ten hours*, a select few live for sixty or seventy *years* and preserve the chemical memory of dangerous invaders, all the while checking in at their

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 30, 2018. Good Friday.

² Paul Brand, M.D., with Philip Yancey, *In His Image* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 56-58.

assigned lymph gland every few minutes. These Master Cells safeguard the chemical secrets that remind the body how to respond to any invader previously encountered.³

Blood is the most commonly tested part of the body, partly because it's easily accessible, and partly because it yields such an abundance of information about the body's functioning. Physicians who specialize in the study of blood are called "hematologists," and the "hema" of "hematology" comes from 'αἷμα ("haima"), the Greek word for blood, as in το αἷμα του χριστου ("ta haima tou Christou"), "*the blood of Christ*" (Hebrews 9:14).

Whether we like it or not, and whether we understand it or not, Christian faith is inescapably blood-based. Old Testament writers frequently and graphically described blood sacrifices, and their New Testament counterparts chose the phrase "blood of Christ" three times as often as the "cross of Christ," and five times as often as the "death of Christ."⁴

As I'm sure you know, the practice of animal sacrifice in the Tabernacle and the Temple grew out of God's instruction to Israel, ensuring that they had a daily reminder that their sins were forgiven on the basis of the death of another creature in their places. So it was that Jesus later said to His disciples, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you*" (Luke 22:20).

For tonight, if you have your Bible, please turn to John 6:53-58. This is the most difficult text in the Bible about blood, and on this Good Friday evening, we need to consider its truths. Here's the text:

So Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day, because my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the manna your ancestors ate—and they died. The one who eats this bread will live forever."

Wow. As offended as you and I may be by such a teaching, our disgust pales in comparison to how perfectly dreadful this would have been for the Jews who first heard it, having been told all their lives that eating blood was one of the very worst offenses that one could commit against God.⁵ *What in the world was Jesus thinking?!?*

A call to participate in a sexual orgy would hardly have shocked Jesus' followers more offensively than did these statements. No Jew ingested blood—ever. Blood was *always* poured out before God as an offering, for all life belongs to God. Yet *to those very* people Jesus said, "Drink my blood." Is it any wonder the Jews bristled, and the disciples slunk away?

Jesus knew the offense His words would cause, so why did He say them? That's a crucial question, and I suggest to you that Jesus spoke as He did not primarily in order to offend, but in order to radically transform our thoughts about blood.

God had previously told Israel that "If you drink the blood of your sacrifices, then the life of those sacrifices enters you—life that belongs only to me. Don't do it." But now, Jesus said, in

³ Brand, p. 84.

⁴ Brand, p. 61.

⁵ Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17, 7:27-27

effect, “If you drink my blood, my Life will enter you—the very same Life and Power that energize and transform the universe. Do it!”⁶

Dr. Paul Brand was a renowned surgeon who pioneered new procedures to help persons afflicted with Hansen’s Disease, sometimes known as leprosy. Dr. Brand was a follower of Jesus who reflected deeply on his work in the light of his faith, and he gave a lot of thought to this difficult passage. With Dr. Brand, I’d like to consider this difficult passage from John 6 with you under the headings of “*immunization*,” “*transfusion*,” and “*cleansing*.”

IMMUNIZATION. “Some years ago,” Dr. Brand wrote, “an epidemic of measles struck Vellore, India, where we were serving, and one of my daughters had a severe attack. We knew she would recover, but our other infant daughter, Estelle, was dangerously vulnerable because of her age.

“When the pediatrician explained our need for convalescent serum, word went around Vellore that the Brands needed the ‘blood of an overcomer.’ We did not actually use those words, but we called for someone who had contracted measles and had overcome it. Serum from such a person would protect our little girl.

“It was no use finding somebody who had conquered chicken pox or had recovered from a broken leg. Such people, while they might be healthy, could not give the specific help we needed to overcome measles. We needed someone who had experienced *measles* and had defeated that disease.

“We located such a person, withdrew some of his blood, let the cells settle out, and injected the convalescent serum. Equipped with ‘borrowed’ antibodies, our daughter fought off the disease successfully. The serum gave her body enough time to manufacture her own antibodies. She overcame measles not by her own resistance or vitality, but as a result of a battle that had taken place previously within someone else. . . .

“There is a sense in which a person’s blood becomes more valuable and more potent as that person prevails in numerous battles with outside invaders. After antibodies have locked away the secret of defeating each disease, a second infection of the same type will normally do no harm. A protected person has ‘wise blood,’ to use a term from Flannery O’Connor. . . .

“This property of blood, which can be shared from person to person, gives meaning to a word used in the Bible that has otherwise seemed puzzling to me: the word *overcome*. In one of the visions in Revelation the apostle John describes a violent confrontation between the forces of good and of evil. Satan is hurled down, and the victors, people who have come into eternal life, are described this way: *They overcame [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb* (Revelation 12:11).”⁷

“My friends, **the blood of Jesus Christ has overcome**. It is as though He went out of His way to expose Himself to temptation, to encounter the stress and strain you and I will meet—to gain ‘wise blood’ for our benefit. . . . And so, today, when we partake of Communion, it is as though our Lord is saying to us, *This is My blood, which has been strengthened and prepared for you. This is My life which was lived for you and can now be shared by you. I was tired, frustrated, tempted, abandoned; tomorrow you may feel tired, frustrated, tempted, or abandoned. When you do, you may use My strength and share My spirit. I have overcome the world for you*” (John 16:33).⁸

⁶ Brand, pp. 67-68.

⁷ Brand, p. 92.

⁸ Brand, pp. 94-95.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus has overcome the world, the flesh, and the Devil for us. We can be immunized against the destructive forces of evil as a result of a battle that has taken place previously within someone else: *Jesus, our Lord*.

Well, that's IMMUNIZATION. Now let's look at **TRANSFUSION**. Dr. Brand wrote that "I arrived as an orthopedic surgeon at the Christian Medical College in Vellore just as the college was recruiting specialists from all over the world. Among these was Dr. Reeve Betts, from the Lahey Clinic in Boston, who was to become the father of thoracic surgery for all of India.

"When Dr. Betts first arrived, he ran up against an immediate roadblock: the lack of a blood bank. In some surgeries we had been relying on a Rube Goldberg device I designed to suction out and recirculate a patient's own blood. But chest surgery required a prepared supply of five or more pints of blood, which in turn entailed an efficient collection and storage procedure. Betts had the experience and the skill to save the lives of the patients who began streaming to Vellore from all over India, but he could do nothing without blood.

"For this reason, the development of a blood bank became my number one priority for 1949, and the attitudes of the Indian people themselves offered the biggest roadblock to my success. To the Indian people, blood is life, and who can tolerate the thought of giving up one's own life, even to save someone else?

"One on occasion, we were faced with a twelve-year-old girl with a very bad lung. Reeve first informed the family that the lung had to be removed in order to save the patient's life. The family members nodded with appropriate gravity. Reeve pointed out that the surgery required at least three pints of blood, and we had only one, so the family would need to donate two more. At that news, the family elders huddled together, and then announced a willingness to pay for the additional pints.

"Reeve flushed with anger. Working to control his voice, he explained that he had no other source of blood—it could not be purchased, for any amount of money. They might as well take the girl home and let her die. Back to the conference.

"After more lively discussion the elders emerged with a great concession. They pushed forward a frail old woman weighing perhaps ninety-five pounds, the smallest and weakest member of the tribe. The family has decided to offer her as a transfusion donor, they reported. We could bleed her.

"Reeve fixed a stare on the sleek, well-fed men who had made the decision, and then his anger boiled over. In halting Tamil, he blasted the dozen cowering family members. Few could understand his American accent, but everyone caught the force of his fury as he jabbed his finger back and forth from the husky men to the frail woman.

"Then, abruptly, with a flourish, Reeve rolled up his own sleeve and called over to me, 'Come on, Paul—I can't stand this! I won't risk that poor girl's life just because these cowardly fellows can't make up their minds. Bring the needle and bottle and take my blood.'

"The family fell silent and watched in awe as I dutifully fastened a cuff around Reeve's upper arm, swabbed the skin, and plunged the needle into his vein. A rich red geyser spurted into the bottle and a great gasp rustled through the spectators. At once there was a babel of voices: **Look, the sahib doctor is giving his own life!**"⁹

⁹ Brand, pp, 99-100.

“And so, because of my medical experience,” Dr. Brand wrote, “the Lord’s Supper has become, not an embarrassing relic from primitive religion, but an image of startling freshness. I can celebrate the sensation of coming back to life through the symbol of Christ’s blood transfused into me.”¹⁰

“When we come to the Lord’s Table, we come with faint breath and weakened pulse. We live in a world far from God, and during the week we catch ourselves doubting. We muddle along with our weaknesses, our repeated failings, our unconquerable sins, our aches and pains. In that condition, bruised and pale, we are beckoned by Christ to His table to celebrate Life. We experience the gracious flow of His forgiveness and love and healing—a flow that tells us that we are accepted and made alive, transfused.”

“Our Lord did not convey Himself genetically. If He had, His offspring would have been one-half Christ, one-fourth Christ, one-sixteenth Christ, and on through the generations until for us, His distant descendants of modern times, faint evidence of His bloodline would remain. Instead, He chose to convey Himself personally and nutritiously, offering to each one of us the power of His own resurrected Life.”¹¹

The Communion service reminds us that Jesus is not dead and removed from us by century upon dusty century. Jesus is alive and present **in** us. Every cell in His Body—and those “cells” include *every one of us who follows Him*—every cell is linked, unified, and bathed by the nutrients of our Common Source, our Lord Christ. It is still true tonight that **His blood is our life**.

IMMUNIZATION, TRANSFUSION, and finally, **CLEANSING**: Dr. Brand pointed out that “Blood’s quality of cleansing appears throughout the Bible, from the earliest books to the latest. . . . New Testament authors often refer to Jesus’ blood as ‘cleansing’ us (e.g. 1 John 1:7), and Revelation describes a multitude who ‘*have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*’ (Revelation 7:14).

At the same time, he wrote, “nothing in the modern world causes us to think of blood as a cleansing agent . . . unless we look at the actual function of real blood in real bodies.”¹² “Medically, blood sustains life, in part, by carrying away the chemical by-products that would interfere with life—in short, by cleansing. Just as blood cleanses the body of harmful waste products, forgiveness through Christ’s blood cleanses away the waste product—our Sin—that impedes true health.”¹³

“In a time when blood transfusion was not yet known,” Dr. Brand observed, “Jesus chose the perplexing figure of ‘drinking’ His blood. Who can adequately describe or understand how that works? We are brought near to Him; we participate in Him; He feeds us; He nurtures us—any of these phrases only hints at the mystery.” Our modern understanding of blood transfusion may help us grasp His intended meaning.¹⁴

My friends, the blood of Israel’s ancient sacrifices represented atonement for sin, but that blood could not accomplish such atonement, because “*it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*” (Hebrews 10:4). And so, *because God’s children are human beings—*

¹⁰ Brand, pp. 102-103.

¹¹ Brand, p. 104.

¹² Brand, p. 74.

¹³ Brand, pp. 77-78.

¹⁴ Jesus also used the analogy of branches attached to a vine as another way to understand this concept (John 15:1-8).

made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying. . . .

Therefore, it was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. Then he could offer a sacrifice that would take away [our sins] (Hebrews 2:14-17, NLT).

My friends, Christ has appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come. In the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands (that is, not of this creation), he entered the most holy place once for all time, not by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:11-12).

One more story and we're done. Leonard Sweet tells about the making of a film in London in the early 70's. The film focused on the daily rituals of the homeless—on their trials and their joys. Some were drunk, others were mentally disturbed. Some were articulate and others were unintelligible.

One of England's leading composers, Gavin Bryars, agreed to help with the audio for the film. During his work, he became aware of a constant undercurrent of sound that appeared whenever one particular homeless man was filmed. At first, the sound seemed like muttered gibberish. But after removing the background noise, Bryars discovered that the old man was singing.

Bryars learned that this beggar did not drink or socialize with others. The old man was alone and filthy, but he also had a sunny demeanor. What distinguished him from the others was his quiet singing. For hours and hours, he seemed to sing the same thing over and over. The man's quiet voice was untrained, but it never wavered from pitch.

One day, the composer looped together the first 13 bars of the homeless man's song, preparing to add orchestration to the piece. He left the loop running while he went downstairs for a cup of coffee. When he came back, he found his fellow workers listening in subdued silence, and a few were even weeping. The old man's quiet, trembling voice had leaked from the recording room and had transformed the whole floor of the office. Here's what he was singing:

*Jesus' blood never failed me yet
Never failed me yet
Jesus' blood never failed me yet
There's one thing I know
For he loves me so.*

And that, after all, is really all we need to know and all we need to remember!¹⁵

Christ has for sin atonement made, what a wonderful Savior!
We are redeemed, the price is paid. What a wonderful Savior!

What a wonderful Savior is Jesus, my Jesus!
What a wonderful Savior is Jesus, my Lord!¹⁶

¹⁵ Leonard Sweet, *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), pp. 161-163.

¹⁶ E. A. Hoffman, *What A Wonderful Savior* (1891).

My friend,

“Would you be free from the burden of sin?
There’s power in the blood, power in the blood!
Would you o’er evil a victory win?
There’s wonderful power in the blood!

Would you be whiter, much whiter than snow?
There’s power in the blood, power in the blood!
Sin stains are lost in its life-giving flow.
There’s wonderful power in the blood!

There is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb.
There is power, power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb!”¹⁷

¹⁷ Lewis E. Jones, *There Is Power in the Blood*.