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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus every Lord's Day, but on Easter Sunday we ramp up our celebration. Back in the 1960s, Nikita Khrushchev was the Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In one infamous speech he declared the superiority of communism over America by saying, "We will bury you!" It was ironic, because by the time Khrushchev died in 1971, he had fallen out of favor in the Soviet Union, and they didn't want to bury him there. They asked the Americans if we would accept the corpse, but President Nixon declined. In desperation, the Soviet officials asked the Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, if they could send Khrushchev's corpse to be buried in Israel. Golda Meir agreed but she added, "However, I must warn you that Israel has the world's highest resurrection rate!" And indeed, I was in Jerusalem last month, and I can verify again that the tomb of Jesus is STILL empty!

This morning I want to talk about the "Scarlet Thread Running through the Bible." This scarlet thread begins in Genesis and runs all the way to the empty tomb.

I'm borrowing this title from one of my mentors, W.A. Criswell, the long-time pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas. On New Year's Eve in 1961, Dr. Criswell preached a five-hour message tracing the theme of the blood of the lamb in every book in the Bible. Don't worry—I'm only going to take thirty minutes. But if you care to listen to Dr. Criswell's entire message you can find it at www.wacriswell.org. Here's a quote from his introduction: "Did you know that a scarlet thread winds its way throughout the entire Bible? Skeptics and scoffers may fire their arrows at the validity and historicity of Scriptures, but believers throughout the centuries have seen this line of crimson weaving through every book of God's holy Word. It is the story of redemption of mankind at the price of the blood of Jesus Christ."

The key verse for understanding this scarlet thread is Hebrews 9:22. The Bible says, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." That's the driving principle that runs throughout the entire Bible. I don't understand WHY a blood sacrifice leads to forgiveness; I just know the Bible says it and I believe it. I don't understand how a brown cow eats green grass and gives white milk. But I'm not going to refuse a cold glass of milk until I understand the process!

I was in Beijing last Sunday and there was an article in *USA Today* two days ago about how Christianity is exploding in China, in spite of the fact that the government arrested the pastor of an underground church two weeks ago. I met with pastors who know him personally. A 21-year-old Chinese girl was quoted in the article telling why she was interested in studying the Bible. She said she didn't want to go to a church just to hear a message that we should be nice to one another. She said, "I need to know why Jesus died." I'll answer that question today. In the Bible, there is a recurring pattern revealing the necessity of a blood sacrifice, a scarlet thread. Let me tell you the stories about this scarlet thread that weaves throughout history.

1. Adam and Eve: Blood covered their shame

The first place we see the scarlet thread is in Genesis 3:21. We discover there's a great difference between fig leaves and the skin of an animal. The first death recorded in the Bible was the animal that was killed to clothe Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve lived in a paradise called the

Garden of Eden. But when they disobeyed God, their eyes were opened and they realized they were naked. They felt a totally new emotion: Shame. They'd never felt it before, and we've felt that emotion ever since. In their attempt to cover their shame, the Bible says they wove fig leaves together. They probably thought they looked pretty good. I can just hear Adam saying, "Eve, you look stunning. Where did you get your dress, Leaves Claiborne?" Can't you hear Eve saying, "Thank you Adam, green is your color. You look handsome in your Hart, Shatner, and Figs suit, as well." But when God came looking for them, they still felt shame so they hid from God. In Genesis 3:21 the Bible says, "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." God could have waved a magic wand, and clothed them, or He could have required their own blood. But God was setting a pattern when He used an animal as a substitute for them. Why? Because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." The Bible doesn't identify the animal, but don't be surprised when you get to heaven to discover it was a lamb. The scarlet thread continues into the next story:

2. Abel: Blood was the accepted offering

Cain and Abel both brought sacrifices to the Lord. Cain brought an offering comprised of plants because he was a farmer. Abel was a shepherd and he brought a sacrifice from this flock before the Lord. And Genesis 4:4 says God accepted Abel's offering, but not Cain's. Now, if you had been there that day, you probably would have preferred Cain's offering. I can imagine there were fruits and vegetables, and perhaps some flowers. And if you had looked at Abel's bloody sacrifice you would probably have said, "Yuck! I'll take the vegetable plate. But God accepted the bloody sacrifice. Why? Because you can't get blood from a turnip.

You might think that's unfair for God to choose Abel's sacrifice. After all, Cain did his best. Well, we can assume Adam had already instructed them on the importance of approaching God with a sacrificial lamb. Cain basically said, "I don't want anything to do with the blood sacrifice, so I'll just substitute fruit for the blood." And there are people today who still react the same way. They say, "I don't want anything to do with this idea of the blood of the lamb." A few years ago, a mainstream denomination, intentionally went through their hymnals and removed any song that mentioned the blood of Jesus. It makes them too squeamish I suppose. But that denomination has been declining since.

Frankly, you don't hear many sermons anymore on the Blood of the Lamb. I suppose some preachers think the topic of the blood is too uncouth for people in the 21st century. But it is the central theme of scripture. Why did God accept Abel's sacrifice? Because "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness." The next place we see the scarlet thread is:

3. Abraham and Isaac: Blood of a ram substituted for a son

Abraham had only one son, and as a test, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. So Abraham took his son to Mt. Moriah. They had probably made sacrifices there before and as they walked up the mountain, Isaac was puzzled. He asked, "Dad, where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide the lamb." Isaac didn't know he was going to be the sacrifice. As Abraham was preparing to plunge the knife into his only son, God stopped him saying, "Don't harm the boy. Now I know you fear me because you were willing to give up your only

son.” And in Genesis 22:13 the Bible says that there was a ram caught in a thicket of thorns and Abraham sacrificed it instead of his son.

Mt. Moriah and Mt. Calvary are on the same mountain. Centuries after Abraham and Isaac walked up Mt. Moriah, the Lord Jesus was our ram caught in a thicket—His thicket was a crown of thorns. And as our substitute He walked up the same hill carrying a cross. Next, the scarlet thread is seen in:

4. Passover: Blood of a lamb shielded them from judgment

Fast-forward from the time of Abraham until when the children of Israel were slaves in Egypt. God sent Moses to Pharaoh to say, “Let my people go.” Pharaoh refused even after God sent a series of plagues upon the land. Finally God announced one final judgment upon Egypt. Whenever God pronounces judgment, He always gives a way to escape the judgment as well. He instructed the Hebrew families to take a lamb without spot or blemish and sacrifice it. They were to take the blood from the lamb and apply it on the sides and tops of the doors of their houses. Then they were to roast the lamb and enter into the house and eat it. God said, “On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn...and I will bring judgment upon all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.” (Exodus 12:12-13) That’s why it’s called Passover. When God saw the blood, His judgment passed over those families. And when God sees the blood of the Lamb, Jesus, applied to the doorposts of your heart, His judgment passes over you as well. This scarlet thread continues to weave and it is headed toward specific destination. Next we see it in:

5. Temple sacrifice: The blood of animals took away their sin

Fast-forward from Moses until the time when the Jews built a Temple on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem. Every day, hundreds of animals were sacrificed at the Temple. By now some of you may be thinking, “What a cruel practice and a senseless waste of animals!” Well, these lambs and cattle were placed on a burning altar, which we would call a grill, and they were called a burnt offering. In Texas we would just call it a barbeque. I cooked steaks last Thursday night and the fire flared up and I served a burnt offering to our guests! So, although there was a powerful religious symbolism involved, the animals were grilled and eaten by the priests and their families just like we eat beef and lamb today. There were hundreds of priests and Levites employed at the Temple, and this is how they fed their families.

But one day a year was the Day of Atonement, called Yom Kippur. Two goats were chosen. The word “goat” is often substituted for a ram, a male lamb. One goat was slain and its blood was collected in a bowl. The high priest took a hyssop branch and dipped it in the blood. Then he moved aside the thick curtain separating the Holy of Holies and the Most Holy Place. Only on this one day in the year could he enter there to sprinkle the blood of the lamb on the seat of the Ark of the Covenant, called a mercy seat. The other ram, which gives us the term “scapegoat,” was sent away from the city to symbolize the removal of sins.

Leviticus 16:21-22 says, “He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it

all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert." The people didn't have to die, or go out into the desert. The rams served as substitutes for them.

We could trace the scarlet thread running through every other part of the Old Testament, but let's fast-forward to the conclusion of the scarlet thread. Here's the point God was making:

6. The scarlet thread leads to: THE CROSS!

When John the Baptist was preaching in the desert, he saw Jesus walking toward him. In John 1:29, John makes one of the most important identifications in the history of the world. Some people called Jesus a prophet, or a healer, but John knew the true identity of Jesus. He said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29)

John announced to the world that Jesus was the completion of God's Scarlet thread. With Abraham and Isaac it was one lamb for a son; at the Passover it was one lamb for a family; on the Day of Atonement it was one lamb for a nation. But John announced Jesus is the Lamb of God for the entire world!

You've probably heard of Ivan Pavlov, the Russian psychologist who conducted experiments in conditioned responses. He had a group of dogs he fed whenever he rang a bell. Ring a bell; feed the dogs. Ring a bell; feed the dogs. Then after several cycles he could ring a bell and he wouldn't feed the dogs, but they would begin to salivate. That's called conditioned response. That's exactly WHY God led the nation of Israel to offer a sacrificial lamb over all those centuries. He was conditioning them for the day when John would say, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Had Israel been paying attention they would have said, "Oh, now we understand!" But they were so consumed by their own religion that they missed God's point. The Bible says in John 1:11 that Jesus "came to that which was his own (the Jews), but his own did not receive him."

The cross of Jesus was not just some afterthought for God. It wasn't plan B when plan A failed. It was God's plan from the very beginning. In Revelation 13:8 the Bible identifies Jesus as the "Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." Before God flung out stars, before He heaped up the mountains, before He scooped out the oceans, He planned for the Lamb of God to die on the cross for you and for me.

You may be asking, "So what?" I want to show you that there is "Power, power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb!" Notice three things that the blood of Jesus can do for you.

a. The blood of Jesus redeems us from a wasted life

You only have one life, and if you live it for yourself, or for money, or pleasure, or fame, you've wasted your life. But once you discover that your Creator loves you and sent His Son to die for

you, then you discover the real purpose for which you were made.

There was a high price paid for our salvation. The Bible says, “It was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” (1 Peter 1:18-19)

The word “redeem” means to “purchase back.” It was a word that came from the slave trade. As the Romans conquered other nations they brought thousands of slaves back to Rome. These slaves were put on the auction block and redeemed with gold and silver. In the same way we are all slaves to our sin, which leads to a wasted life. Something much more valuable than gold and silver purchased our freedom—the precious blood of Christ.

When we get to heaven, we won't be rejoicing over the teachings of Jesus or the miracles of Jesus. We will worship him because He shed His blood for us. Revelation 5:8-9 says, “They (that's us) fell down before the Lamb...and they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy...because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.’” The only way you'll make it into heaven is through the blood of the Lamb because it is the only currency God accepts.

b. The blood of washes away the stain of our sin

All of us are born with a sin problem. Nobody had to teach you how to lie or cheat; it is part of your human DNA. This sin problem is like an ugly, deep stain on your clothes and it takes more than new and improved Tide to wash it away. It's ironic, but the only thing that can bleach out that stain is blood. The only element in the universe powerful enough to remove that stain is the blood of Jesus. The Bible says, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7)

I knew a wealthy, educated man in my previous church in Alabama who spoke five foreign languages and held the patent for several inventions. But in his early fifties he had what we often call a “nervous breakdown” and was committed to a psychiatric facility. He asked for me to come see him and after some great agonizing of spirit he admitted to me that when he was a teenager, he and some friends had engaged in what they thought was a harmless prank, and it had resulted in a crime being committed. He carried such guilt and shame from that one act that it literally destroyed his mind. He just couldn't believe Jesus' blood could wash away that sin. I shared with him 1 John 1:7 and we prayed together. He confessed the sin to God one final time and finally accepted God's cleaning power. He agreed to contact the people who suffered from that prank and attempt to make restitution. It was as if I could see a huge weight lifted from his shoulders as he prayed, “Lord, I thank you that this sin is under the blood of Jesus Christ, and I am cleansed by your blood.” He finally came to such freedom and liberation by understanding the healing power of the blood of Jesus Christ that he asked me to share his story, and he has shared his testimony many times.

Are you carrying a load of guilt today? Is there something from your past that you think is too horrible for God to forgive? You're wrong. God said, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they

shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18)
Will you accept His cleansing today?

I love the old hymn that asks the question: “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow; Nothing but the blood of Jesus!”

c. The blood of Jesus brings us into a relationship with God

Sin is not only like a stain or a blemish, but it separates us from a holy God. Do you feel close to God today, or do you feel as if God is a billion light years away from you? This scarlet thread is the only thing that can draw you closer to God. The Bible says, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2:13)

Sin has always created a barrier. Remember when I was talking about the Day of Atonement? God’s presence was said to dwell within the Holy of Holies but only one man, the high priest, could approach God. And he could only do it for one day a year, and for three hours, and only with the blood of the lamb. A thick curtain separated everyone from the presence of God. But the Bible says when Jesus died, this curtain in the Temple was ripped apart from top to bottom. This curtain was four inches thick and six stories tall. Perhaps strong men could have ripped it from bottom to top, but the fact that it was ripped from top to bottom is to indicate that God ripped it open. God was saying, “There is no more need for the sacrifice of animals and the rituals of a religion. A way has been opened to everyone to know me now!” Jesus was the final and perfect sacrifice for our sins. We don’t have to shed the blood of animals, or even our blood—He is our perfect substitute.

It is a modern miracle to see what God is doing in China. It is estimated that between 20,000 and 25,000 Chinese people are coming to Christ every day. This past week I had the honor of meeting some of the leaders of the underground church in China. These are extremely educated and successful men who came from the fields of business, law, and medicine. I asked one of them about the most effective evangelism strategy he uses to lead Chinese people to Christ. I was surprised when he answered, “I just use the Chinese alphabet.” The Chinese alphabet doesn’t use letters, their characters are pictures; each word is made by combining different pictures. Chinese people are amazed to learn that many Chinese words are built with pictures that coincide with the stories in the Bible. For instance, the Chinese character for “flood” pictures eight people in an ark, exactly as described in the story of Noah in Genesis.

Of all the Chinese characters that have a Biblical connection, the most powerful is the word “righteousness.” In Chinese, it basically means “a lamb for me.” This is truly amazing when you realize that the Chinese language dates back to 3000 B.C.—centuries before the Bible was written! When this pastor shares that the Bible identifies Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” almost 100% of the Chinese turn to Jesus on the spot!

CONCLUSION

One Easter morning, the great pastor, Dr. A. J. Gordon, surprised his Boston congregation when he set an old rusty birdcage on the pulpit. It was empty and the door was open. He told the congregation a story about meeting a dirty-faced little boy from the slums who had the birdcage filled with frightened sparrows he had trapped. Dr. Gordon asked him what he was going to do with the birds. The kid scowled and said, "Oh, I just like poking them with this stick, and watching them flutter around. When I'm finished playing with them I suppose I'll kill 'em." Dr. Gordon asked, "Would you sell me those birds?" The boy said, "Mister, you don't want these birds, they ain't worth nothin'. They're just old field sparrows." Dr. Gordon said, "I'll give you \$5 for them and the cage." The kid's eyes lit up as he said, "Five whole dollars? Sure!" The boy walked off laughing at his new riches. Dr. Gordon then walked into a park and opened the door of the cage. At first the sparrows huddled in the cage, but as he gently tapped the bottom of the cage, each one flew to the door and then spread their wings to fly away to freedom. They chirped as they flew away and Dr. Gordon said as the birds circled in the sky, it was as if they were singing, "Redeemed, redeemed, redeemed!"

That's our story as well. The devil has similar plans for us. Jesus said he comes only to "steal and kill and destroy." (John 10:10) Jesus knew all the silver and gold in the world would not purchase our freedom, so He offered the silver of His tears, and the gold of His precious blood. He paid the price to redeem us. And when you trust Him, He opens the cage door to the future and He gives you wings of faith so you can fly singing, "Redeemed, redeemed, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb; Redeemed, redeemed, His child and forever I am!"

The scarlet thread runs from Genesis to the cross, but it doesn't end there. Satan tried to cut it off at the cross, but the scarlet thread continued into a cold dark tomb. But as another great hymn announces: "Up from the grave He arose with a might triumph o'er His foes. He arose a victor from the dark domain; And He lives forever with His saints to reign. He arose! He arose. Hallelujah! Christ arose!"

And today, this scarlet thread is God's lifeline to you. He has tossed it to you. Will you grab it? The scarlet thread runs through the Bible, but when you let it run through your heart, then you can know without a doubt that you'll spend eternity in the presence of God.

OUTLINE

1. Adam and Eve: Blood covered their shame. *Genesis 3:21*
2. Abel: Blood was the accepted offering. *Genesis 4:4*
3. Abraham and Isaac: Blood of a ram substituted for a son. *Genesis 22:13*
4. Passover: Blood of a lamb shielded them from judgment. *Exodus 12:13*
5. Temple sacrifice: The blood of animals took away their sin. *Leviticus 16:21*
6. The scarlet thread leads to: THE CROSS!

John said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." *John 1:29*

The Blood of Jesus:

a. Redeems us from a wasted life

"It was not with perishable things such as silver and gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." *1 Peter 1:18-19*

b. Washes away the stain of our sin

"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." *1 John 1:7*

c. Brings us into a relationship with God

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ." *Ephesians 2:13*