

INTRODUCTION

Some sermons can be way too long. A guy got up in the middle of the pastor's sermon and started walking out. The pastor said, "Where are you going?" He said, "I'm going to get a haircut." The pastor said, "Why didn't you get a haircut before you came to church?" The guy said, "When you started preaching I didn't need a haircut, but I do now!"

On New Year's Eve 1961, the pastor of First Baptist Church Dallas, Dr. W. A. Criswell, preached a five-hour sermon entitled "The Scarlet Thread that Runs through the Bible." Don't worry. I'm only going to take thirty minutes. I'm borrowing this title about the scarlet thread from Dr. Criswell. His five-hour sermon has been turned into a book that you can read online. He wrote:

"A scarlet thread winds its way throughout the entire Bible. 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."

What is the scarlet thread? It's what the Bible is all about. It's the blood of Jesus that He shed on the cross to redeem all of humanity. Dr. Criswell didn't make up the idea of a scarlet thread. The Old Testament mentions several instances where scarlet thread was used for something very important. For example, scarlet yarn was often dipped in the blood of animal sacrifices and sprinkled on people and buildings to make them clean. Also, many of the decorations in the Temple used scarlet threads, including the curtain separating two of the holiest rooms inside. The ephod, a kind of decorative breastplate the high priest wore, also utilized scarlet threads. But the most important use of a scarlet thread in the Old Testament comes from a wonderful story of grace found in the book of Joshua. Rahab was a harlot living in Jericho. She welcomed two Israeli spies who were checking out the land on a reconnaissance mission to see how difficult it would be to conquer it. Rahab, although she was not a Hebrew, hid them from the Jericho police. She knew the power of the one true God and realized Jericho would be destroyed by God's command. So she begged the spies to spare her and her family.

The spies told Rahab what to do: "Behold, when we come into the land, you shall set this line of scarlet thread in the window from which you let us down. And you shall bring your father and your mother, and your brothers, and all your father's household, home to you." (Joshua 2:18) That's exactly what she did, and she was saved.

Now let's skip over to the New Testament and see what it says about the scarlet thread—a picture of Jesus' sacrifice to save us from sin. Hebrews 9:16-22 contains the most important verse in the New Testament that refers to blood atonement.

Hebrews 9:16-22. "In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all

the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, 'This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.' In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

The writer mentions a will; it doesn't go into effect until the person dies. An elderly man who was extremely hard of hearing visited his doctor, who gave him some new high-tech hearing aids that were virtually invisible. A couple of weeks later he went for a follow-up appointment with his doctor. His doctor said, "I suppose your family members are pleased with your new hearing aids." The man said, "Oh, they don't know I have them. They still think I'm deaf. I've just been sitting around listening to them. I've changed my will three times in the last two weeks!"

A will does not go into effect until the person dies. The writer of Hebrews argues that because Jesus died, we are now able to claim the spiritual inheritance He left for us. The trail of blood redemption begins in the first pages of the Bible and goes all the way to the last pages of Revelation. As we follow this scarlet thread through the pages of Scripture, we keep circling back to this key verse that speaks about the importance of the shedding of blood. "The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." (Hebrews 9:22) To trace the beginning of this thread, let's go all the way back to the Garden of Eden and walk through the Bible. You will start to understand how the whole of the Bible points to Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross. And you will see for yourself what the Bible is all about.

1. GOD COVERED THE SHAME OF ADAM AND EVE

When God created Adam and Eve, they were naked but they felt no shame. Yet once they rebelled against their Creator and sinned, they became aware of their nakedness and experienced guilt for the first time. They tried to cover their shame on their own by making garments of fig leaves. They probably felt proud of themselves (another new emotion that came after the Fall) for being so creative. I can just hear Adam saying, "Eve, you look stunning in green." Can't you just see her smiling and saying, "It's the latest Leaves Saint Laurent. And Adam, you look dashing in your Tommy HilFIGer."

But when God came looking for them, they were so guilt ridden that they hid from God. They did not know what to do about their situation. They had no clue about how to get rid of this nagging sense of guilt. But God did. God could have just created a wool garment for them to wear instead of flimsy leaves, but instead He marked this occasion as the very first shedding of blood. "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." (Genesis 3:21)

An innocent animal died to cover the shame of Adam and Eve. The Bible doesn't say what kind of animal skins they wore, but don't be surprised when you get to heaven and find out that it

was a lamb slain to cover their shame. Why? Because "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness."

2. GOD ACCEPTED THE SACRIFICE OF ABEL

If we follow the scarlet thread, it leads us to the next generation after Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve named their first son and began raising Cain! Then they had another son they named Abel. The Bible says Cain grew up to be a gardener and Abel was a shepherd. Like their parents, they too were sinners. They instinctively felt a need to make some kind of offering to God to make up for their guilt. The Bible says, "In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering." (Genesis 4:3-4)

So why did God accept Abel's sacrificial lamb instead of Cain's fruits and veggies? Some might say it's because you can't get blood out of a turnip, but there's more to it than that! On the surface, we might think God is being unfair to reject Cain's offering. Didn't Cain do the best he could? We can only infer that Adam had already instructed them about the importance of a blood sacrifice, but Cain took the contrary attitude of many people today. He thought to himself, "I don't want anything to do with this idea of a bloody sacrifice. I think the plants I grew with my own hands should be good enough." Why did God prefer Abel's sacrifice? Because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

3. GOD PROVIDED A SUBSTITUTE FOR ISAAC

Abraham had only one son with his wife, Sarah, and Isaac was his pride and joy. But sometimes we can even make our children or our family a substitute for God. We don't know if Abraham did that, but God put Abraham to the test regarding his priorities when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. As they walked up the slopes of Mt. Moriah where the altar was, Isaac began to grow curious. He asked, "Dad, we have the wood and we have a knife, but where is the lamb?" And with a burdened heart Abraham said, "Son, God will provide a lamb."

Just moments before Abraham was going to plunge the knife into his son, an angel appeared and stopped him. God said, "Now I know that you fear me. Don't harm your son." Then we read in Genesis 22:13 that "Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide." (Genesis 22:13-14) Did you know Mt. Moriah and Golgotha where Jesus died are on the same slope in Jerusalem? Centuries after Abraham and Isaac climbed that lonely mountain, God provided another Lamb—this One caught in a crown of thorns placed on His head by Roman soldiers. As our substitute, Jesus climbed the same hill and died on a cross. Why? You ought to know by now: "because without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

4. GOD PROTECTED HIS PEOPLE AT PASSOVER

Fast forward from the time of Abraham until Joseph moved his family to Egypt. Several generations later, they were enslaved by the Egyptians. God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh, "Let my people go." Pharaoh refused, even after God sent a series of terrible plagues on the land to persuade him. Then God planned one final act of judgment. Whenever God judges, He always provides a way to escape His terrible judgment. He told each family to take a lamb and sacrifice it outside their homes. They were to apply the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. The Bible says, "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on 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) When the Death angel arrived, those families who had trusted and obeyed God were protected from the judgment.

The New Testament says Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us. When God sees the blood of Jesus the Lamb applied to your heart, you are protected from eternal judgment. Why is that? Because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

5. GOD COVERED THEIR SIN ON THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Now let's trace the scarlet thread forward through history. God's people ultimately left Egypt and while they traveled in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, God instructed Moses to build a tabernacle. This was a portable version of what would one day become the Temple. There were hundreds of daily sacrifices for sins, but once a year there was a special day called Yom Kippur. It was also called the Day of Atonement. The Hebrew word *kaphar* means "to cover." This ceremony didn't forgive sins; it only "covered" sins temporarily. Yom Kippur involved two goats. One was slain, and the other was set free. "He [the High Priest] is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat." (Leviticus 16:8-10)

The symbolism here is important. One goat was killed, but the other was led out into desert and released as a picture of how the sins of the people were carried away. Of course, the other goat was killed because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

6. GOD WAS CONDITIONING ISRAEL TO RECOGNIZE JESUS

The New Testament clearly shows us the reason God did all this—the reason He gave the Law to the Jews—was to lead them to Christ. All of the Old Testament rules and regulations were supposed to prepare the Jewish people for the time when John the Baptist would come on the scene. John would make a revolutionary statement about the Messiah, someone the people of Israel had been expecting for so long. John was the last Old Testament prophet. All the other prophets before him had declared, "He is coming! He is coming!" But God chose John to declare, "He is here!" Jesus was the final fulfillment of the scarlet thread—the One John

pointed to and said, "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29)

Ivan Pavlov, a famous Russian physiologist, conducted experiments in conditioned response. He used dogs for a certain experiment where he would ring a bell, and then he would feed the dogs. He would ring the bell, feed the dogs. Ring a bell, feed the dogs. Soon he discovered that all he had to do was ring the bell, and the dogs would begin to salivate anticipating food. That's called conditioned response—the dogs were conditioned to respond a certain way. Someone has said this experiment never would have worked with cats because the cats would have ignored him! I once saw a cartoon about Pavlov's experiments where a dog said to another dog, "Watch what I can make Pavlov do. As soon as I drool, he'll smile and write something down in his little book."

That's exactly what God was doing through the centuries. All those years, through all those offerings of blood, God was conditioning the minds of the people to recognize the work of the Messiah. This beautiful scarlet thread is what the Bible is all about—it runs all the way from Genesis to the New Testament. It ran through the Last Supper where Jesus said the cup of red wine represented a new covenant in His blood. Before the Roman soldiers tortured Jesus, they placed a scarlet robe on His shoulders. And the scarlet thread found its end in the blood that Jesus shed at the cross. There He died, the Lamb of God "slain from the foundation of the world." At the cross, Satan thought he had severed this scarlet thread, but it threaded its way undaunted through a cold and dark tomb until it burst through the other side—alive forevermore!

When John made the announcement—"Look! It's the Lamb of God!"—the people of Israel should have said, "Aha! We see now! That's what God was teaching us through Abraham and Isaac! Jesus is the reason there was a Passover Lamb. Jesus is the reason there was a scapegoat to take away sin. Jesus is God's fulfillment and final sacrifice for everyone, for all time!" Sadly, most of them missed the point of Jesus dying on the cross, and they just went back to the ritual of animal sacrifices until the Romans destroyed the Temple in A.D. 70.

7. GOD REDEEMS HUMANITY THROUGH THE BLOOD OF JESUS

The scarlet thread winds its way through the last book of the Bible, Revelation. The last time the blood is mentioned in the Bible is in Revelation 19. Jesus is the future returning King, riding a white horse and wearing a robe dipped in blood. The scarlet thread starts with the spilled blood of the animal God killed to make clothing for Adam and Eve and it ends with the King of Kings wearing clothing dipped in blood!

Why is this scarlet thread, this ribbon of blood, so valuable? In Revelation 5 John describes a vision of a mighty multitude gathered around the throne of God in heaven. It's a future scene of where we will be one day. A scroll is presented and an angel asks the question, "Who is worthy to open the scroll?" This scroll represents the title deed to Paradise, or heaven. It's our spiritual inheritance that our human parents, Adam and Eve, mortgaged away when they sinned. The scroll had been sealed shut ever since sin entered the world. Who could open such

an important scroll? John was devastated and wept because it seemed as though there was no one worthy to open it. For a moment, it seemed as if the fate of humanity was sealed forever. Then John heard a voice that said, "Don't cry! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah has won! He is able to open the scroll!" C. S. Lewis chose a mighty lion, Aslan, to portray Christ in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. With great relief and excitement John wrote in Revelation 5:6, "Then I turned and saw a Lamb that appeared to be slaughtered standing in the center of heaven." Standing? You would expect a slain lamb to be crumpled on the ground, but this Lamb was standing—alive and well!

Wait a minute—which one was it? A lion or a lamb? The answer is yes! A lion rules, while a lamb submits. A lion roars, and a lamb silently dies. Jesus is both.

Then John writes that a great multitude in heaven sang a new song to praise God. We'd better learn these words in Revelation 5:9 because we'll be there singing with them one day: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9) Do you see why Jesus was unique? For Abraham, there was one lamb for one son. At Passover, there was one lamb for a family. At Yom Kippur, there was one lamb for a nation of Jews. But with Jesus, one Lamb takes away the sin of the whole world! Jesus is for people of every nation, every tribe, and every language. Jesus, the Lamb of God, purchased our salvation with His precious blood. And why? You know it now. Because without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

I love the story of Ben Hur, although I prefer the 1959 movie version starring Charlton Heston over the 1925 or modern 2016 version. In the movie, Jesus is hanging on the cross when suddenly there is a violent thunderstorm. Blood drips from the wounds of Jesus, falling at the foot of His cross. The rain carries His blood downward in small streams, which turn into a larger stream until it becomes a roaring river that carries the blood of Jesus to all the world. That is powerful symbolism. The blood of Jesus is for the entire world!

TAKEAWAY TRUTH

Jesus died because without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. We are saved through faith in this finished work of Christ. That is what the Bible is all about. But what about those people in the Old Testament? They were saved the same way we are saved—by grace through faith. Abraham trusted God's plan and he was saved. Moses trusted God's plan and he was saved. Rahab trusted God's plan and she was saved. Looking back from this side of the cross, we know that God's plan all along was Jesus. Looking forward toward the cross, those Old Testament saints believed in God's plan of redemption and they too were saved.

There's only one way to be saved today. You are saved by grace through faith. Grace is the free gift of forgiveness God offers you. Acting in faith is simply accepting that gift. As Elisha Hoffman wrote in a hymn from 1878, "Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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