

SAVED BY THE BLOOD

Most of the time we assume that Jesus believes what we believe. That way we do not have to change any of our beliefs.

I am not a vegetarian. I enjoy and appreciate our monthly barbecue out on the patio after worship. But I do not believe that the best way to have a good relationship with God is to sacrifice an animal on some temple altar in order to *feed* God. I do not think the flames and fumes rising from an altar sacrifice are the way God eats. Therefore I do not believe that feeding God choice cuts of meat from our best animals will make God more inclined to bless us or do us special favors.

But I do know that the ancient world *did* believe all of this, and that the altar of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was busy every day preparing and cooking meat on the altar in front of the temple, and that far more sacrifices were being offered on high holy days, especially Passover. This was going on up to and all through the time when Jesus was alive on earth. And the ritual worship of animal sacrifices was taking place all over the known world in hundreds of temples of other religions and dedicated to other gods, known in Judaism as pagan gods.

I also know that the language and concepts that are still being used today to explain what Jesus did for us come from the imagery and beliefs that surround such animal sacrifices. "*Behold the lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world.*" (John 1:29) The great shame of dying on a cross – a horrible death designed to punish criminals – was transformed into the holiest sacrifice ever made on earth, and this is what "saves" us. Blood was special and sacred to the ancient world. It was the life force. Without it, all animal life dies – including us. The priests captured the blood from the animals being butchered and flung it against the altar: the gift of life from God being given back to God.

So we are "saved by the blood" – Jesus' blood. The Cross is seen as the greatest and holiest of all altars, and because Jesus is innocent, sinless, and "the only begotten Son of God," His merit is beyond comprehension. He is sacrificed to God on the Cross as "the lamb without blemish" – the most precious sacrifice ever offered. And this is a gift so pleasing to God that it covers all the sins of all the followers and believers through all time. It appeases God, takes away God's wrath, saves us all from the punishment we deserve.

I do not believe that any of this imagery carries or conveys the truth of the Christian Faith. At the same time, I am aware that most Christians down through the ages have believed this, or something very close to it. If that made them trust Jesus more and give their lives to Him, then that in itself is precious and sacred. But I am caught in a world where more and more people know that this is hooey. And even if they do not know it, I do. Should I abandon Jesus and the Christian Faith because some of the explanations and assertions of two thousand years ago no longer make sense? Lots of former friends and followers have done that – they have deserted Jesus’ church. I certainly have been tempted to do so (for other reasons). I get really tired of the ignorance and stupidity of Christian followers, and especially the fact that they are so proud of it.

But God puts up with *my* ignorance and stupidity, so who am I to complain? My real problem is that I believe what Jesus tries to reveal to us, and I believe *in Him* more and more. Underneath the layers of sincere but foolish explanations, the truth shines brighter and brighter. But if the Cross and the blood are so sacred that we dare not look at it for fear we will be committing some kind of sacrilege, then all understanding – and our Faith along with it – is frozen in a former time that no longer makes sense to us. Freezing truth because we are afraid to look at it, for fear it will vanish if we do, is an even greater sacrilege. All through Christian history, we have set up safeguards to protect us from doubt and unbelief: The Scriptures are without contradiction or error. The Pope is infallible. The creeds of the church are not to be questioned. The priests can handle and serve communion, but common believers like you are not to handle such holy things; in fact, you can only receive the bread, but not the cup.

Most Christians are still trying to tell me that the only way to explain or understand the significance of the crucifixion – Jesus dying on the Cross – is to see it as the most special and efficacious sacrifice of all time. Jesus was innocent, and as the true and pure “lamb of God,” He had such great merit that when His blood was shed on the Cross, that blood had the power to save us all from our sins, make things right between us and God, and free us from being thrown into Hell, like we all deserve to be.

Jesus’ blood is precious because HE is precious. Yours is too, by the way. But I do not think His blood is a magic potion. Do you? Is that what you are betting your soul on? If so, Jesus will save you

anyway – but because He is God’s Messiah, and because God is gracious, forgiving, and loving. That is what saves us, not our beliefs or His blood. So let’s move on.

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Does punishment right wrongs? Much of the ancient world believed it, and a large segment of the world today believes it still. If somebody rapes or lies or murders or steals and we hurt them appropriately – punish them for it – they will be good from then on. Or at the very least, they will be afraid to do anything bad ever again. Not only does this kind of justice fail to bring the amendment of character or heart in the vast majority of cases, but those who were hurt by the bad behavior are seldom helped by the punishment meted out to the offenders. If your daughter is raped or murdered, no amount of punishment can even the score – no amount of punishment can ever make it right. Do we imagine that God loves his children any less than we love ours?

No amount of burning in Hell is going to make up for the sins of the world. No amount of punishment is ever going to even the score and bring righteousness where the brokenness and sin of the world were operating before. How long does Hitler have to burn to make up for the evil and heartache caused by the Third Reich?

You no longer have to persuade me that Jesus has sufficient merit for any situation or circumstance. My regard for Jesus is already off the charts, and His merit – whatever that means – is also off the charts. But if “saving us” cannot be about punishment or about paying prices, then the whole explanation of why Jesus died on the Cross is false to begin with. Maybe we are not saved by Jesus being punished for us or by Jesus paying some kind of price to get us out of Hell.

Maybe we are saved by discovering that God loves us. And God is not into punishment, but into correction – into mercy and forgiveness. Of course, we would have to switch from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant to even begin to see or believe such things. And we might start to like phrases like “being born anew,” because it is as if the veil is taken away from our eyes and we begin to see a different reality – a Kingdom not of this world, yet real and true and all around us. We might even celebrate by remembering the Last Supper and being reminded of the New Covenant that comes in His blood – only, that is a very different understanding of blood, and that is blood with a very different purpose.

I will lose a few of you now, and I do not want to lose any of you. But in The New Church and now in Community Church, Congregational, it is imperative for us to see and know this: Jesus did what He did – said and taught and believed what He did – and acted accordingly. And yes, that got Him crucified. That’s the reality. That really happened, and nobody can change it. But the words we use to *explain* what He did, why He did it, and what it all means – what we *say* about what He did and why He did it – may or may not reflect the *reality* of what He did. You see the difference? What Jesus did is unalterable. What we *say* about what He did is NOT unalterable. Yet now we have many generations of creeds, statements of faith, sermons, books, canon law, and church traditions all claiming to know and understand and teach us what Jesus really did, what it means, and how we should respond because of it.

Jesus never wrote any of it down. He could have but chose not to. He knew that the level of understanding was far too meager, and that locking it down in 30 A.D. would cement the errors – as we did in 325 and in 500 and all along the way, and as we are doing still today. Jesus and the New Covenant were too new, and His only hope was that His followers would rethink it, renew their prayers, and reproclaim it in each new generation. Some did and still do. Some just perpetuate the errors of the past and, in one way or another, burn those who disagree.

Let me go over it again more slowly.

How is burning in Hell for eternity paying some kind of price that brings justice – righting some kind of wrong? If you cannot explain it, maybe nobody else can either. So it ends up that “the blood of the Cross” is some kind of magic potion that frees us from the justice of our being thrown into Hell. Punishment does not right wrongs, and this punishment is “over the top.” It reeks of vengeance and evil far more than it suggests any kind of loving God. So we are punished forever. And by the way, even though our penal system is based on the assumption that punishment rights wrongs, it gets harder and harder to comprehend how any of us ever believed this. The assumption was that if you “hurt” somebody enough, they would be good, at least on the surface – that fear would deter people from misbehavior, from doing wrong. The fear of punishment *does* make some of us a little more careful, and it makes many of us more defiant or more secretive. But physical pain does not translate into true “goodness,” and punishment is not the solution to evil. Conversion is.

The realization that we have hurt someone we care about is certainly a deterrent for many of us. But that is a different category of “pain” – remorse, regret, an inner sorrow – often leading us to repentance. In many cases, outer punishment *wipes away* our inner remorse. “We already paid for it, so we don’t have to be sorry anymore.” It often leads to anger and defiance as well, but that leads into a different subject. Nevertheless, humans who think God is punishing them (causing them pain) are often driven away from any close relationship with God. They end up defiant, rebellious, angry – even toward God. It does not seem to matter or even occur to them that they may have misunderstood and accused God falsely. Emotion is not always fair or rational.

In any case, getting to know Jesus or His Holy Spirit frequently changes our minds and hearts about the true nature of God. That is why Jesus is called “The Reconciler.” “*God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself*” (II Corinthians 5:19) But that is also why the traditional scenarios of punishment and Hell are such damaging belief systems to the Christian Gospel. Jesus is trying to reveal to us the God of love and mercy, while many churches and preachers are trying to “scare the Hell out of us” by assuring us that God is perfectly willing to throw us into the flames forever if we get out of line with what they are telling us. And what they are telling us may seem to have a superficial connection with various Scripture passages – if we do not connect those passages to the larger story of Jesus’ ministry and teachings, and if we do not connect them with what Jesus was actually doing and proclaiming.

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Many of us have not believed the punishment and Hell scenarios for a long time. Jesus is God’s Messiah (God’s anointed one), and therefore Jesus is the rightful King – in David’s line – who comes to fulfill the New Covenant. His top mission and Message is to invite all of us into God’s Kingdom. “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” And God is not an ogre, but in fact God loves us. Forgiveness (mercy and grace) does not come from magic – it comes from the Father’s love. Forgiveness does not come from the “magic” of Jesus’ blood – it comes from the Father’s love.

But is Jesus’ word trustworthy? Does Jesus know what He is talking about? Does Jesus know what He is offering? “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood.*” (I Corinthians 11:25)

What does it mean when a covenant – a promise – is sealed in blood? It means you can trust it – you can bet your life on it. It means there is no subterfuge. There are no loopholes hidden or possible. There are no ulterior motives. There are no secret escape clauses. “Sealed in blood” means this is utterly and totally genuine. “Cross my heart and hope to die” is an old playground formula by which children once tried to persuade and reassure each other that what they were saying was the absolute truth. If a person puts their life on the line, there is no possibility left that they are holding something back – that they are pretending one thing but meaning another.

When the New Testament speaks of “saved by the blood,” we assume it means we are talking about expiation – that the imagery of altar sacrifice is the core meaning of Jesus’ death on the Cross, and that this is the only possible meaning. But this is *not* the only possible meaning. It is not even a very good possibility. Too many things do not match up: the love of God; the true intentions of Jesus; the authentic principles of life – all corrupted by an ancient assumption about justice, the worth of punishment, and the connection between Jesus’ death on the Cross and God’s anger toward us. “*Father, forgive them*” is just a euphemism showing what a good heart Jesus has, but it is not to be taken seriously? Is that what we think?

Jesus goes to the Cross – not to do some magic act that will keep us all out of Hell. It is the “sealed in His blood” act that tells us we can trust Him absolutely and all the way: His Kingdom is authentic. His invitation for us to enter the Kingdom is true and real. His Message of God’s love for us is without any possible subterfuge. “*Come, follow me*” is not mere metaphor – not a magic potion. The whole thing – His life, death, and Resurrection – is sealed by His blood and utterly reliable. We can therefore have “faith in Him” – which is to say we can trust Him totally and all the way. It is the world’s most eloquent and powerful “exclamation mark.” Jesus’ Message and ministry are sealed in His blood.

From Palm Sunday on, Jesus is claiming to be our rightful King. And He is inviting us to claim Him as our King and to walk into God’s Kingdom with Him. He will not recant; He will not back down; He will not run. The pressure mounts; the insistence of all the religious authorities in Israel keeps getting uglier and more threatening. But Jesus will not recant, will not back down, will not run. So we kill Him. God does not kill Him – WE kill Him. So His Message, His invitation, His claims to His true identity, His insistence that He is God’s Messiah

and knows what He is talking about – it's all sealed by His blood. He is not kidding. He really means it – unto death and beyond. That is what I hear when I hear “We are saved by His blood.” We can trust Him – utterly, and all the way.

Of course, the fact that God backs Him up also impresses me. Even Jesus could not rise from the dead without the power of God backing Him up. But Jesus had to put His life on the line in the first place, or we would never have known that part either. So we are not saved by one piece of it. We are saved by His blood and by His life and by His Resurrection and by His continued presence with us through all our days and all our trials.

Maybe someday His people will receive it and feel it and show more gratitude than most of us have thus far. But if that happened, the Kingdom would already have come, and the New Covenant in His blood would already be fulfilled.

In any case, we are not saved by His blood – we are saved by the Father's love, which Jesus reveals to us. Only, it is never *our* love. All our love is some form of pretense – until it is the love of God flowing to and through us. We can never give what we have not received. That's the human tragedy – and our glory. We never outgrow our need for God.

SUPPLEMENT TO SERMON

Few of us realize how many books have been written about the meaning of the Cross, how many sermons have been preached, how many lectures have been given. So if you imagine that I think one sermon from me covers or exhausts the subject, you are very much mistaken. I am nevertheless appalled at how much of the Christian world is still stuck on ancient assumptions, and how many Christians just assume that we are telling our Message correctly and understanding it in essentially the only way it can be understood.

There is a wonderful new book out about Martin Luther, close to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Eric Metaxas is a wonderful scholar, and obviously deeply moved by the life of Martin Luther. But on page 314, making another point entirely, he blithely says (for emphasis), “But Luther would have seen this as a leap back to Eden without the cross, as though we could go back through our own efforts and forget that blood had ever been shed for our sins.” Has Eric Metaxas ever thought much about the meaning of the Cross, or does he just assume it means what almost everybody is telling us it means? Is Jesus’ blood shed *for* our sins? Is there some kind of deal with God being made that trades Jesus’ virtue or merit against the huge debt that we owe for being imperfect?

Jesus’ blood is not shed *for* our sins; it is shed *because* of our SIN – because we are alienated from God; because the relationship between us and God is so distant and hazy that we do not recognize Jesus, “see” the Kingdom, or know how much God loves us. Jesus comes to reconcile us to God – to restore or establish the love-bond relationship between us and God. Jesus’ death does not buy off our punishment; it tells us how much we can trust Him, and therefore how much we can trust the God He reveals to us.

THE LAMB

Things happen, and afterward people try to understand what was going on and what it might mean. Jesus is “*the lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world.*” This is not something Jesus ever tried to tell us. This is the author of John’s Gospel, telling us what he thinks the crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus means – sixty or seventy years after it has taken place.

What *Jesus* tells us you heard in the Scripture reading this morning. *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”* Jesus talks about “the Kingdom” all the time. The Kingdom is His major theme. *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* And Jesus is constantly inviting His followers to come into the Kingdom immediately. But Jesus never refers to Himself as “the Lamb,” nor does He ever make any comment about being a symbol of the altar sacrifice. We are not reconciled to God because Jesus paid a “blood sacrifice” price for us. We are reconciled to God because God actually loves us – and sent His Messiah to tell us and prove it. We sort of already knew. But as we all know, when life gets hard, it’s easy to doubt what we only sort-of know. Jesus reveals the God who loves us and always has – the God who in grace and mercy wants to forgive us; wants us to awaken, repent, and “come home”; wants a love-bond relationship with us no matter what we have done or how far we have strayed.

In Jesus’ imagery, we may be like lambs who have strayed – lambs who have gotten lost. But Jesus is not the lamb who will be sacrificed on God’s altar to pay a debt for us so that God can forgive us. And God does not kill Jesus – not ever. We do! So we are still “saved by His blood,” but not because His blood is some magic potion. We are still saved by His blood because Jesus’ claims and promises about the love of God are authentic, totally reliable, totally trustworthy. His whole life and Message is sealed by His blood. That is, He would not run from or be frightened off, bribed off, or turned away from His Message and revelation. It is all sealed by His blood – sealed by His death. There is no way to suspect or pretend that Jesus did not mean what He said or that He did not Himself believe what He was telling us. And then God backed it with the Resurrection. And Jesus has been making Himself known to His followers as the Holy Spirit of the Risen Lord ever since.

Things happen, and afterward people try to figure out what it means. Please try to hear me clearly. I am not saying that none of Jesus’ early followers ever explained things by comparing Jesus’ death to the altar sacrifices. Clearly that did occur to some of them. The Book of Hebrews is full of altar imagery. In it, Jesus is not the Lamb, but He is the true High Priest, who offers a true and lasting sacrifice that reconciles people to God once and for all. But this was not an early understanding; Hebrews is more probably an early second-century writing.

Jesus as the sacrificial lamb is not a familiar or favorite imagery of Paul's. He mentions it in the first letter to the Corinthians: "... *Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.*" (I Corinthians 5:7) But this is twenty-two years after the crucifixion, and Paul does not track this thought at all – not like he does with most of his analogies. As far as we know, Paul never mentions it again.

There is a comment in First Peter – "*You were set free by Christ's blood, blood like that of a lamb without mark or blemish*" (I Peter 1:19) – and another in the opening of John's Gospel, which we already mentioned: "*Behold the lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world.*" (John 1:29; 36) And the Book of Revelation sees Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb and compares His death to the lambs being sacrificed on the temple altar in Jerusalem, thus reconciling people to God by means of a more perfect sacrifice.

But all three of these writings come to us from the end of the first century or early in the second century A.D. This means that for roughly seventy years, the church was not dependent on the imagery of altar sacrifices or the analogy of a sacrificial lamb to explain or understand the meaning of Jesus' life and ministry among us. We certainly know about His death and Resurrection from the time it happened onward. We know about the coming of the Holy Spirit from Pentecost onward – fifty days, not fifty years, from the crucifixion. And we are saved "by His blood" not as a magic potion, but as the seal of unmistakable authenticity – promises and declarations made without any subterfuge or ulterior motives. That is, Jesus might have been mistaken – assuming you do not believe in His Resurrection or that He is God's Messiah – but it is beyond doubt that Jesus Himself believed what He was telling us and proclaiming to us. His belief is sealed by His blood.

POSSIBILITIES

With that as backdrop, we will go to just a few passages to demonstrate. The first is found in the Book of Acts: "*Keep guard over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has given you charge, as shepherds of the church of the Lord, which he won for himself by his own blood. I know that when I am gone, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.*" (Acts 20:28)

Paul is talking to the elders at Ephesus, as he heads toward Jerusalem for the last time. Luke is telling us about this visit. Most normal readers in our time would read this part about “won for himself by his blood” and assume without a second thought that this refers to Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross as a price Jesus is paying to God for the sins of all the rest of us. But that is not the only possibility, and it is certainly not what I am hearing when I read this.

Paul loves these Ephesian elders, and they love him. They all know they are invited into the Kingdom, and that repentance is the only way in. But they have all dealt with that already, and now the issue is the life of the church in the world, particularly at Ephesus. Paul is warning them about the threats from the outside, not the inside, and he is reminding them that they do not have to be afraid – because Jesus’ promises are beyond doubt: sealed in His blood. He did die for them – He was killed by those who did not believe in His Message or in His true identity – but God is not their adversary. God’s love is sure and certain. They do not even have to be afraid of the wolves – other humans still opposed to Jesus and His Message. So no matter what happens, they can go on trusting Jesus – and the God who sent Him. The promises and the Message are sealed in His blood.

Nobody has to switch to my scenario. I just want you to know that there is a very different alternative for understanding what we are reading. The more familiar understanding makes no sense, if you try to think very much about it. So it ends up consigned to magic and mystery. There is plenty of mystery in my understanding too. Only, it is the mystery of why God loves us so much, not the mystery of why and how the blood saves us. Most of us have not seen or participated in an animal sacrifice for a couple of thousand years now, so we are a little rusty on how the story of Jesus gets explained by that imagery. But knowing we can trust Jesus unto death, we can still comprehend that – if we want to.

The next passage is from Paul’s letter to the Romans. You ready?

“But now, quite independently of law, though with the law and the prophets bearing witness to it, the righteousness of God has been made known; it is effective through faith in Christ for all who have such faith – all, without distinction. For all alike have sinned, and are deprived of the divine glory; and all are justified by God’s free grace alone, through his act of liberation in the person of Christ Jesus. For

God designed Jesus to be the means of expiating sin by his death, effective through faith. God meant by this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had overlooked the sins of the past – to demonstrate his justice now in the present, showing that he is himself just and also justifies anyone who puts his faith in Jesus. What room then is left for human pride? It is excluded. And on what principle? The keeping of the law would not exclude it, but faith does. For our argument is that people are justified by faith quite apart from any question of keeping the law.” (Romans 3:21-28)

So, I have waded right into the thick of it. That is, most traditional Christians would say this passage makes it clear that my understanding is mistaken. But I love it for confirming what I am trying to tell you. They would say that God’s “act of liberation” is Jesus’ blood shed on the Cross. But I am equally certain that God’s act of liberation is the whole life, death, Resurrection, and sending of the Holy Spirit – not just one tiny isolated piece of it. And the clear emphasis of this passage is a dramatic change: a moving from our efforts to obey the law ... to our trust in the love that Jesus keeps telling us is real. The whole thing, says Paul, is effective through faith – through our trusting in Jesus. It is all sealed in His blood, which means we can trust Him utterly. There is no suggestion here of His blood being a magic potion or of His sacrifice being some mystery that frees us from Hell by some secret formula. If we trust Jesus, we follow Him into His Kingdom – we claim Him as our true and rightful King. But that is the beginning of a whole new Pilgrimage – a whole new WAY of Life – not a “salvation” we are handed because some debt we do not understand has been paid for us.

True, God’s righteousness is very different from what we had been assuming: it is not based on law; it is not a matter of our being obedient enough to be without error or mistakes. God’s righteousness is based on a love-bond relationship. And that’s where we keep missing the turn. It is hard to believe. We are justified by merely trusting the Word of Forgiveness? The Word of Forgiveness made flesh and dwelling among us? By merely trusting in the authority and purpose of Jesus? It is hard to fathom – until we realize that it is sealed in His blood. The offer of His New Kingdom is totally reliable – made without equivocation or any possibility of subterfuge. That is the blood that makes the difference – the blood that makes it possible for us to truly trust Him, all the way.

Is that enough? It is far from enough for me. I have been tracking it for years. It was a major turnover for me – a major transformation of everything I had been taught. But it was also a major change from magic and superstition to a Lord and Savior who really cares about me and who wants to spend the rest of my life with me – not just hand me a one-time ticket out of Hell.

Time for one more? From Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has conferred on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. Before the foundation of the world he chose us in Christ to be his people, to be without blemish in his sight, to be full of love; and he predestined us to be adopted as his children through Jesus Christ. This was his will and pleasure in order that the glory of his gracious gift, so graciously conferred on us in his Beloved, might redound to his praise. In Christ our release is secured and our sins forgiven through the shedding of his blood. In the richness of his grace God has lavished on us all wisdom and insight. He has made known to us his secret purpose, in accordance with the plan which he determined beforehand in Christ, to be put into effect when the time was ripe: namely, that the universe, everything in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ.” (Ephesians 1:3-10)

Our sins are forgiven through the shedding of His blood. How clear does it have to be? But for me, that makes it clear the other way around. The promise of God's love for us is made clear and sealed in His blood – made absolutely trustworthy and certain by the fact that Jesus would not swerve or turn away from the Message and the hope He had proclaimed. We were and are invited into His Kingdom. But His Kingdom is far bigger and more important than a trumped-up fear of being thrown into Hell. We do know the origin of that fear: the apocalyptic scenarios of a Day of Judgment being proclaimed for two hundred years before Jesus came, and never predicted or proclaimed by Jesus himself.

This passage in Ephesians is wonderful, and it is focused on God's true purpose: to bring all things into a unity in Christ. Indeed, our release is secured, but it is a release from aimlessness and hopelessness and separation from God – because God's Messiah has come to unlock the invitation of God and to reconcile us to God by the awareness and certainty of God's love for us.

And it continues:

“In Christ indeed we have been given our share in the heritage, as was decreed in his design whose purpose is everywhere at work; for it was his will that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, should cause his glory to be praised. And in Christ you also – once you had heard the message of the truth, the good news of your salvation, and had believed it – in him you were stamped with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; and that Spirit is a pledge of the inheritance which will be ours when God has redeemed what is his own, to his glory and praise.” (Ephesians 1:11-14)

You can read this passage either way, of course. But if you read it in the now-familiar way of release from Hell and of Jesus paying a price for us by His blood sacrifice, it feels to me like a very small and stilted vision of God’s purpose in sending Jesus. On the other hand, if the invitations and promises are made clear and certain by being sealed in His blood, then the rest of the passage comes alive with dimensions and possibilities far beyond what I was ever told or taught about the love of God or the purposes of Jesus, the Christ.

Try it yourself with some other passages:

Romans 5:9
I Corinthians 10:16
I Corinthians 11:25 (new covenant)
Ephesians 2:13
Colossians 1:19-20

This is a Congregational Church, and you always have the choice. I just wanted you to know – if you did not know already – that there is a huge choice of two very different ways of understanding who we are and what the Christian Life is really about.