

Genesis 8:21–9:7 — A Sweet Savour, and the Shedding of Blood

Man's Heart Unchanged, Capital Punishment from God, The Image of God, The Blood, and Christ as the City of Refuge

Scripture Reading: Genesis 8:21–9:7

“The LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.”

“And surely your blood of your lives will I require... Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.” (Genesis 9:5–6)

The Sweet Savour: Rest in the Sacrifice, Not in the Judgment

God smelled a sweet savour and said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground. J.N. Darby's marginal note renders sweet savour as odour of rest. This is deliberate: the seventh century of Noah's life, with its resonance of the seventh day when God rested, finds the occasion of God's rest not in the judgment that had just swept the earth but in the sacrifice that Noah offered. God does not find rest in judgment — judgment is his strange work. He finds rest in the sacrifice that points to Christ. And only in what Christ accomplished on the cross does God's rest have a lasting basis.

The flood that had just cleaned the earth of its violence and corruption left man's heart exactly as it was. The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth is stated after the flood just as before it. God could have drawn the inference that

since nothing has changed inside man, the ground must be cursed further. He draws the opposite inference: because of the sacrifice, I will not curse it more. This is pure grace — not grace that ignores man's condition, but grace that finds a righteous basis for dealing with man despite his condition in the accepted sacrifice pointing to Christ.

Man's Heart Is Incurrigible: The Old Nature Never Improves

The plain import of verse 21 — the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth, stated after the most catastrophic divine judgment in earth's history — is that the old nature is not improved by anything that happens to a man externally. No flood, no law, no circumstance changes its character. Romans 7:25 gives the New Testament confirmation: with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin. The two natures are fixed. The coming in of the new does not alter the old; the old remains precisely what it was at the fall.

The theological system that denies the implantation of a new nature — claiming instead that salvation modifies the old nature — is directly against this verse and the whole pattern of New Testament teaching. If the old nature could be improved by an external act of God as drastic as drowning the whole world, it would have been improved then. It was not. The remedy is not modification but the creation of something new in the soul by God's sovereign grace.

The Fear of Man Upon the Animals: Government Extended

And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth (9:2). This fear was placed by God to restrain the animals from killing men. When it is noted that in the great tribulation God will use the beasts of the earth as instruments of judgment (Revelation 6:8), it is as though God partially withdraws this restraint so that the creation, under his direction, becomes a rod of his government in a time when man-administered government has proven wholly

inadequate. It is a reminder of how depraved man must have become for God to enlist the beasts in his work when human institutions have failed utterly.

Every Moving Thing for Food, and the Blood

In 9:3 God grants permission to eat every moving thing that lives, as previously he had given the green herbs. This is a new provision, specifically dated to this post-flood order. Before the flood, the record does not speak of meat-eating as divinely authorized; here it is explicitly granted.

One limitation accompanies the grant: flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat (9:4). The life of the flesh is in the blood — a principle that runs from here through the Mosaic law (Leviticus 17:11) to the teaching about the Lord's death. The blood was given on the altar as atonement for the soul. The Lord Jesus did not bleed to death; his blood was shed after he had voluntarily dismissed his spirit. He said, I lay down my life of myself; I have power to lay it down. Man intended his death; God characterizes an act by its tendency. But the actual historical fact is that he dismissed his spirit voluntarily, cried with a loud voice "It is finished," and then bowed his head — an act of will. His head did not droop in death; he bowed it. The prohibition on eating blood, commencing here with Noah and running through the whole of Scripture, is a token of the reverence due to the blood that speaks of that life given for us.

Whoso Sheddeth Man's Blood: Capital Punishment from God

Verses 5 and 6 give the foundation of capital punishment: and surely your blood of your lives will I require... whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God made he man. The basis is not societal efficiency, deterrence, or the need for proportionate punishment. The basis is the image of God. Man is God's representative in the earth. To murder a man is to attack that representation, to strike at the image of God. Therefore the penalty is

life for life. This is God's own institution, predating the Mosaic law by centuries, binding on the human race generally on this side of the flood.

The objection raised from the sixth commandment — thou shalt not kill — is a misreading. The Hebrew word is not kill but murder. The lawgiver who wrote that commandment was the same Moses who wrote the capital penalties into the law, the same God who instituted government here. There is no contradiction. Murder is the unauthorized, wicked taking of life. Capital punishment, properly administered, is the authorized discharge of the government God gave to man. These two things are not in the same category.

The present movement to abolish capital punishment predates DNA evidence and cannot be explained by it; it arises from a refusal to submit to the order God has given. Man seeks to overthrow the things God has set up for the good ordering of human society. The pattern is stated in Psalm 2: let us break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us. Government, the family, capital punishment — all the structures that God instituted are under assault by the same spirit.

Christ as the City of Refuge

The Mosaic provision distinguished between murder and manslaughter. The murderer was executed; the man-slayer who had killed without premeditation or malice could flee to a city of refuge and find safety. When Peter preached in Jerusalem and charged the crowd with the murder of the Lord Jesus, he also said he knew they had done it through ignorance (Acts 3:17). This opens the possibility of their taking the place of the man-slayer rather than the murderer. The Lord Jesus is the great city of refuge. Those who flee to him are reckoned as man-slayers, not murderers, and find safety. But those who refuse to flee to Christ for refuge are charged with murder — the deliberate killing of God's Son — and will answer for it accordingly.

The remarkable contrast in the present age is that the very act which would, in strict justice, demand the death penalty — the killing of the Son of God — is the very act through which God offers forgiveness and salvation. By the death of Christ, the gospel goes out. The consequence of the greatest act of murder in history is the provision of a refuge for all who will flee to it. This is grace in its most stark and astonishing form.

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