

The bread and wine

Part 2 – The “hard teaching” of John chapter 6

In Part 1, we dived back in Scripture to look for a precedent to the bread and wine to help explain what Jesus was getting at when he gave bread and wine to his disciples in Luke 22. And tucked away in Genesis 14 was an intriguing possibility, when the priest king Melchizedek “brought out bread and wine” for Abram after Abram’s exhausting campaign to rescue his nephew from the clutches of the tyrant king Kedorlaomer.

So we looked into who Melchizedek was and what he brought out bread and wine to Abram for, and out of that emerged a picture of Jesus’ ministry and what he gave bread and wine to his disciples for.

In Part 2, we now jump forward in Scripture to see if it confirms that picture and develops it. And what better spot to land than John chapter 6, where Jesus drops a real bombshell in **John 6:54** when he says, “**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood** has eternal life,” and he mentions it three more times too, in verses 53, 55 and 56. It’s not surprising, then, that Christians have zoomed in on these verses, and especially because of the obvious connection to Jesus’ body and blood pictured by the bread and wine in Luke 22. But do these verses connect in any way to the bread and wine in Genesis 14? Or put the other way round, does Genesis 14 give us a great introduction to John 6?

Well, to make any sense of what Jesus meant by eating his flesh and drinking his blood we’ve got to head back into the Old Testament again, because Jesus was talking to Jews in John 6 using terms from scriptures that **they** were familiar with to get his point across. So, what scriptures would likely pop into a Jewish mind when Jesus mentions drinking his blood?

An obvious verse would be **Leviticus 17:14**, which states: “the life of every creature is its blood. That’s why you must NOT eat the blood of any creature.... anyone who eats it must be cut off.” The last thing a Jew would want to do, then, is eat - or drink - blood. But in John 6 Jesus seems to be saying the absolute opposite by encouraging them to drink his blood. No wonder “many of his disciples said (in verse 60): ‘**This is a hard teaching**. Who can accept it?’”

But why was it hard to accept? Jesus was obviously getting an extremely important point across, so why would he use terms that were difficult to understand? On the other hand, did he phrase it that way to startle those Jews into diving back into their scriptures for an explanation, out of which would emerge a better picture of him? Well, we face the same challenge today with these verses, so let's see what happens when we seek an explanation too.

The first clear point that bounces out of "the life of every creature is its blood" in **Leviticus 17:14** is the direct connection between **blood and life**. Our life as humans is in our blood, and without blood we are dead. By God's design, then, blood is the **PROVIDER** of physical life, and there's nothing like a body lying in a pool of deep red blood slowly oozing from a wound that vividly gets that point across. Moviemakers make sure there's ample blood in the scene when the villain is finally killed, because we want blood to prove he's dead.

So blood is the provider of life, but did God have anything else in mind for blood? Yes he did, because in **verse 10** he says, "I will set my face against that person (Israelite or foreigner, verse 12) who eats blood."

Now that could send a shiver through someone who's been wolfing down blood sausage since the day he was born, but, fortunately, as we'll see, it's the picture these verses **give of Christ** that we now focus on as Christians. But it still begs the question, "Why was eating blood such a serious offence to God?" Why would God disown a person, want nothing more to do with him, "cut him off from his people" (verse 10), and leave him out in the cold as far as any further contact or relationship - just for eating blood?

God's answer in **Leviticus 17:11** is that he meant the lifeblood of a creature to be "given to you (Israelites) to make atonement for yourselves," because "it is **the blood that makes atonement for one's life.**"

The next thing we learn from Scripture about blood, then, is that God designed it to be a **PRESERVER** of life too. The Israelites had better not treat blood as mere food, therefore, because as food it would only preserve their lives for a few hours at most, but blood for **atonement**, on the other hand, would save and preserve "one's life." Bring in the subject of atonement and blood became a **life preserver**. And how it became a life preserver is explained in **Leviticus 16:30**, when once a year an actual "day of atonement" was set aside for Israel "to cleanse you (so that) before the Lord you will be clean from all your sins."

By God's design again, the blood of a bull and a goat (27) on the "day of atonement" cleansed the Israelites from all the sins they'd accumulated over the past year. Whatever mess the Israelites had made of their lives was forgiven, meaning they could happily enter their new year - that began on Rosh Hashanah a few days earlier - with a guilt-free conscience and a clean slate. To quote a present-day Jewish website: "Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) is the holiest day of the year, for on this day God will forgive you, to purify you, that you be cleansed from all your sins before him."

So Jews today still deeply value the Day of Atonement, because it explains how God enables physical life to **continue** in humans who sin. For the Israelites it meant they would not die out as individuals or as a people, even though they were still sinners. Blood, then, was the great preserver of life for them. But it also taught them **what it took to make the preservation of life possible**. It took blood. And since blood was the life of a creature, then the shocking realization for any sinning Israelite was the **cost** involved in their physical lives being able to continue. It cost life. A living creature had to lose its life for their sake. To "**save a life requires a life**" was well understood by the Israelites.

And God made the animal's death dramatic too. The throat was slit and bright red blood spurted out of the gaping wound into a bowl, which the High Priest carried very carefully into the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle (27). How precious that blood was, therefore, because without that blood their sins would not be forgiven and they would not survive as God's people.

So blood had given them physical life in the first place, but now blood became a **second** great gift from God, the gift of CONTINUING physical life through forgiveness. So "life was in the blood" at that level too, as a preserver of life.

For an Israelite to deliberately eat an animal's blood, then, would be using what God gave as the provider and preserver of human life for his own purpose instead, much like people today use their God-given lives for anything but what God gave humans life for.

And that deeply offended God, because it totally ignored that life at every level for those Israelites was a **gift** from him. Without his gifts of life they didn't have a life. And that was as basic as the blood flowing through their bodies to provide them with life, and the blood of animals on the Day of Atonement to preserve their lives through forgiveness of their sins.

So the Jews in John 6 were well aware that without those two gifts of blood from God they had no life. But Jesus then gave them a real shock in **John 6:53** when he said, "I tell you the truth, unless you **drink his blood you have no life in you.**"

It was now their turn to be offended, and confused, because for centuries the Jews believed they DID 'have a life'. It was all right there in **Leviticus 16:34**, that "Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites" meaning all their sins were forgiven by the sacrifice of animal blood, and their lives were secure. But here was Jesus saying their lives **weren't** secure - and in fact they had "**NO LIFE**" at all - unless they ate his flesh and drank his blood.

You mean all those sacrifices and cleansings on the Day of Atonement every year going back centuries, and all those gallons of lifeblood pouring out of the sacrificial animals' throats year after year didn't mean a thing?

Well, face the facts. All those blood sacrifices on the Day of Atonement forgave their sins which gave them a lease on life for another year, yes, but **only for a year**, and then the whole messy business of cleansing by animal blood had to be done all over again on the Day of Atonement next year. In reality it all seemed rather pointless, because the moment they began sinning again they were stuck with having to repeat the gory process of atonement by animal sacrifice next year. And there was no escape from it while sin existed.

It kept the Israelites ticking over year to year physically, yes, but at what cost and for what purpose, other than extending their physical lives for another year, and only until they died too? Maybe they had a point in wanting to "eat" blood, therefore, because what "life" was blood giving them instead?

They **did** have a point too, because Hebrews 10:4 says, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to **take away sins.**" So all those blood sacrifices never actually got rid of sin. The blood of animals forgave sin, yes, but it didn't eradicate sin or stop it. So the Israelites were stuck in this never-ending cycle of the Day of Atonement to cleanse them of their sins. But for what, pray tell, when sin would just dirty them up again?

It begs the question: "Why on earth would God set up an entire system of blood and sacrifices if it had no purpose to it beyond just preserving their physical lives until they died?"

You could ask a similar question, of course, as to why God allows billions of people all over the world to live for no other purpose than surviving until they die. All that struggle making enough money to have a home and family, pay for your children's education, go on exotic holidays and buy impressive Christmas gifts, and for what, pray tell, when it all turns into nothingness at death?

A funeral clearly tells us that life is only temporary. We tread water until we can't tread it any longer and we slip below the waves and die - and there's nothing we can do about it either. Uncle George is in that casket as dead as a doornail, no matter how good or noble he was, or how loving and kind, or how generous and community spirited he was, or how wise and sophisticated he became, or how brave and courageous he was in war, or how charming and funny he was, or that he kept himself fit enough to live until he was one hundred and twenty three. It still all came to nothing when he died.

We all have this wonderful gift of life, then, but **it isn't permanent** - which makes no sense at all, right? Why have life if it just fizzles out to nothing? But it's all great preparation for what Jesus said in **John 6:54**, that "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has **eternal** life," and in **verse 57**, "the one who feeds on me will live," and he means live '**forever**' (in verse 58). Jesus is talking about life being **permanent**, not temporary, and isn't that exactly what we humans would love more than anything else, to have a life that never ends?

But here is Jesus offering exactly that, a permanent, never-ending life. There's a problem, though. It's the condition attached. Permanent life is ours, yes - BUT - only if we "drink his blood," and that's the difficult bit, isn't it? But it shouldn't be difficult when Scripture has already told us "blood is life," so drinking Jesus' blood simply means **drinking his life**. And drinking HIS life makes sense because what his life has to offer is eternal, permanent and never-ending. By God's design, then, drinking Jesus' blood means drinking in the permanent life that Jesus provides, because only he can provide it.

If all this sounds a bit strange, it's not surprising, because it also sounded strange to the Jews who first heard it. And they already knew that "blood was life" too, but so far it had only meant life on the **physical** level. They knew that blood was the provider of physical life, yes - and they knew that blood had also preserved their physical lives as Israelites for another year on the Day of Atonement - but never had blood offered them life eternal and permanent, and never in the blood of a man.

They had to wrap their minds round **Jesus and his blood** now being the provider and preserver of life, and not just physical life either. He meant eternal life. And to them this was totally new, but Jesus told it to these Jews first because God had **already prepared the ground beautifully for them** through all those blood sacrifices. The Jews knew through those sacrifices that blood was the provider and preserver of life, so all they had to do was transfer that understanding to Jesus, that through the sacrifice of his blood he now became the provider and preserver of their lives eternally. It was a simple jump.

And the encouraging part to that was, it meant that all those blood sacrifices hadn't been a waste after all, because they all made sense of what Jesus' blood would do. And the same goes for all those billions of people who spend their lives chasing dreams that end in nothing. None of that is wasted either. The endless cycle of human lifetimes all fizzling out in death primes us Gentiles perfectly for accepting the "hard teaching" of John 6, that "unless we drink Jesus' blood **we have no life in us.**" We understand the "no life in us" bit, because all those graveyards we drive by and funerals we attend prove there is no lasting life in anything physical. It all dies out into nothing eventually.

So God prepared the ground for both Jews and Gentiles alike to make it easy for us to see that life on the physical level doesn't last. He also made it easy for us to see how a life that DOES last requires blood sacrifice. For the Jews that understanding came through the sacrifice of animal blood to save and preserve their lives. But for us Gentiles it has come through blood sacrifice too. Every year on Remembrance Day we honour those who died in war, because, we say, if they hadn't given their lives in sacrifice for us we wouldn't have the life of freedom we have today. So God has had both Jews and Gentiles learn the need for blood sacrifice to save and preserve life.

It means, then, that all the horrible mess and sacrifice of life in war hasn't been wasted either, because it's primed us perfectly from our own experience that blood must be sacrificed to save and preserve life. So it's just a small jump for us Gentiles too, to see how the sacrifice of Jesus' life and his blood becomes the provider and preserver of eternal life.

Nothing, therefore, in this life is wasted, including all those lives lost in war, because it all fills in the picture of why Jesus' blood had to be sacrificed as the cost to be paid to give us a life of freedom from death and evil. Now we can see why his blood was necessary to open up life eternal too.

But **how** does Jesus' life open up eternal life to us? Well, Jesus clued us in on that too, in his use of the term the ***Son of Man*** in **John 6:53**. It meant he was both man and God. And that's important to know, because if Jesus was only a man, then his blood sacrifice could only save us physically. His life would accomplish no more than a man dying in war or dying to save a person from a burning car. It would only save another person's physical life. But Jesus called himself the ***Son of Man*** when saying we need to drink his blood, because **in his blood flowed the life of God too**, so when his life was sacrificed it meant he could save and preserve our lives eternally.

So when Jesus says, "drink my blood," he means "drink up" on what the sacrifice of HIS life and blood made possible, because **it's the stuff of eternity**. It's so much more than animal sacrifices and the sacrifice of human lives in war. Those sacrifices **picture** his sacrifice, yes, and like his sacrifice they save and preserve human life too, but only for a year on the Day of Atonement, and only to give us freedom in this country of ours until we die. **His** sacrifice, by contrast, is the "real drink" as he called it in **John 6:55**, because it opens up eternal life to us.

But how does it open up eternal life to us? If we truly believe that only by his sacrifice and by his life in us can we experience eternal life, how and when does that eternal life kick in for us personally?

The "when" part is explained in **verse 54**: "Whoever drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." To the Jews the "last day" was the resurrection at some distant time in the future, but Jesus made it clear in **John 5:24** that a person has **already** "crossed over from death to life" - and he means "eternal life" (same verse) - when he "hears my word and believes him who sent me." Eternal life began for those Jews when they believed Jesus was the source of it. All that was required after that was the death of Jesus to seal it. The "last day" for those Jews he was talking to, therefore, became the day he would be raised up on the cross, because in context that's what he's talking about here, his death making eternal life possible. It's on the cross, then, that he will raise them up with him to start experiencing their eternal life right away. For us Gentiles now it's the moment we hear his word and believe it.

The "how" part is explained in **verses 56-57**: "Whoever 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 my Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me." So Jesus now feeds his life into us just like the Father fed his life into him.

It's like having a tube down which his life and all its resources pass through to us, and our life needs flow through to him. And it's a constant process that "remains" - as Jesus calls it in **John 6:56** - between him and us. It's going on all the time, so that there isn't a moment when we're not experiencing his life in us, and not a moment when he's not aware of our need. And that's the experience Jesus has made possible. We have no idea what "life" as he experiences it is like, but he supplied the tubing down which it can flow.

But how does all this tie in with what Melchizedek did for Abram, and Jesus giving bread and wine to his disciples? Well, in Luke 22 the two things Jesus gave to his disciples to remember him by were bread and wine. He doesn't give each of them a little wooden cross or a tiny vial of his blood. He gives them something to eat and drink, something to feed on, which ties in exactly with **John 6:56-57**, that "the one who **feeds on me** will live because of me."

To experience eternal life, then, involves the simple act of feeding on Jesus to meet our need, pictured by eating the bread and drinking the wine. And that ties in nicely with Melchizedek giving bread and wine to Abram to meet Abram's need. The difference is that Melchizedek was providing for Abram's immediate physical need, whereas Jesus gave his disciples bread and wine to picture him providing for their eternal needs.

So in giving us bread and wine Jesus very much confirms what Melchizedek did for Abram in Genesis 14, but Jesus expands it hugely, because in HIS priestly office of Melchizedek he's providing for our eternal life needs.

And "providing for our eternal life needs" means he is feeding his life through to us all the time, enabling us to do **all the things that he was able to do in his life** - like loving someone who isn't being very lovely, or being patient with people who are irritating, or being kind with people who are insensitive and selfish.

It goes both ways, though, because **we also LOOK to him to feed his life through to us in our circumstances**. And that's what drinking his blood means. It means we're tapping into what he made possible by his blood, which is HIS life now flowing through us as the provider and preserver of our eternal life.

When Jesus talked about drinking his blood it's not such a hard teaching, then, is it? It simply defines how we Jews and Gentiles can all experience **eternal** life now because of his blood sacrifice.