

Out for Blood?

Rethinking Hebrews 9:22

Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

by Brad Jersak

News flash! In spite of Christianity's serious public image problems (in case you hadn't noticed), there are also increasing signs that the gospel—the Beautiful News of God's grace through Christ—is being rediscovered. Whether in books, blogs or social media, I'm seeing evidence that God is being remembered as the Father of Love, the God enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth. The symbol of the "old rugged cross" is once again coming to represent God's essential nature: namely, his self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love. And that's good news for everyone! On the cross, in the face of human cruelty and bloodlust, God-in-Christ revealed his bottom line character: a mercy that endures *forever*—the loving-kindness that is *everlasting*. We discover that "the blood of Jesus"—i.e. a metonym for God's self-offering, sacrificial love—can wash *anything*.

Anything. Anyone.

Still, there will be holdouts who believe real justice requires retribution, vengeance and satisfaction of wrath.

Happily, I can say many are starting to get over it. Hang in there! The shelf-life of the vengeful punisher is coming due and should pass away in not too many generations.

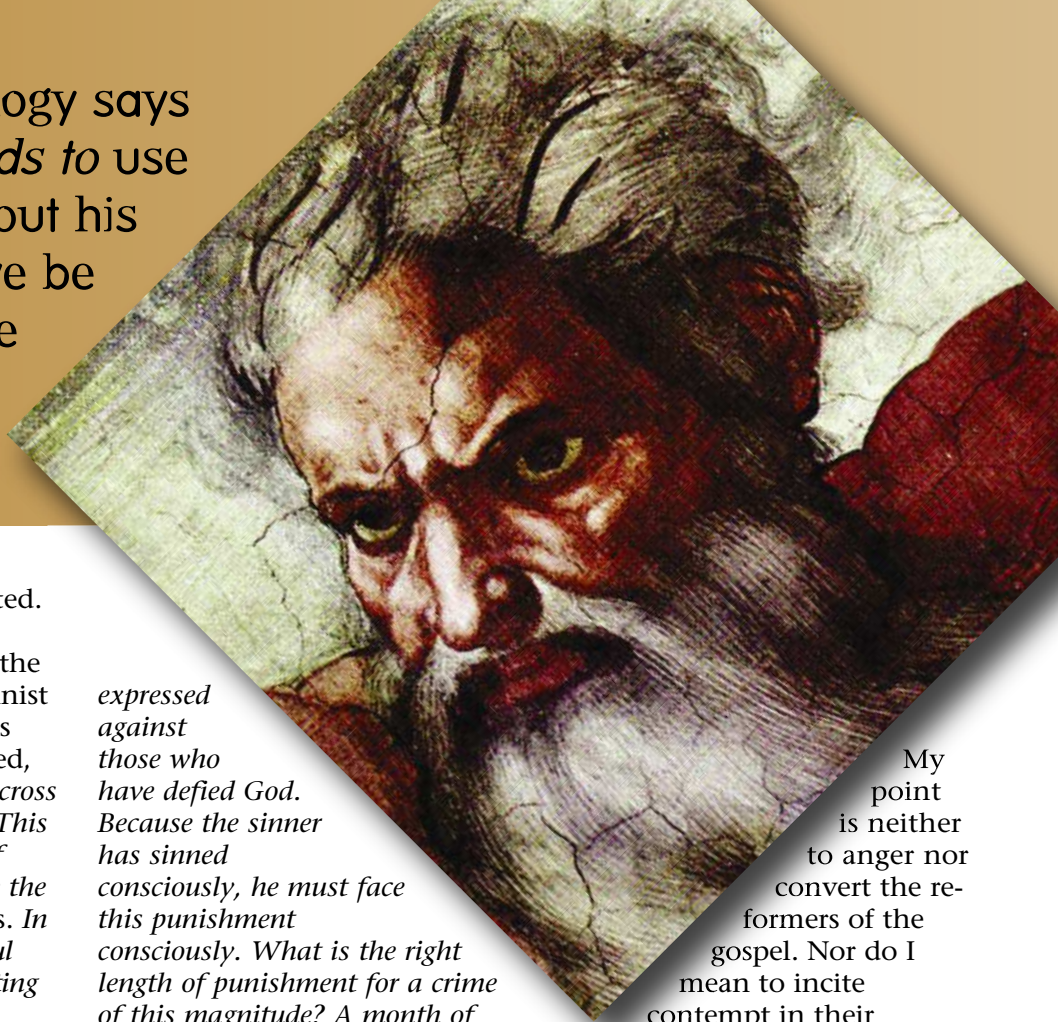
Admittedly, that stubborn old system of judgment and condemnation is

reluctant to let go. It has a rich backstory in Christian theologies of retribution that led to violent practices, including the torture and martyrdom of dissenters. But if our theology says God *needs to use torture to bring about his will, why should we be surprised when we become like the One we worship?* Just a week or two ago, I heard a radio preacher again making it very clear that if Easter means *anything*, it "begins with Christ dying to satisfy the wrath of God."

When I critique the "gospel" of an angry God who can only be assuaged through a violent sacrifice, I am often criticized for fabricating a caricature or straw man. I'm told no one really believes that or preaches it seriously. If only it were true. Sad to say, the caricature defense is an unsubstantiated cliché exposed easily enough by the trick question, "Then how does atonement work?"

I know for a fact that "appeasement theology" persists and permeates much of Evangelical theology—broadly, popularly. I know this because I find the supposed straw man in my undergrad and MA theology course files. I find the analogy of a volcano-god appeased by virgin sacrifices beside the word "propitiation" in my MDiv lecture notes and textbooks. I find pagan forms of appeasement in the margins and footnotes of my own duct-taped Ryrie Study Bible, my own master's thesis and my own sermon

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manuscripts... things I personally, faithfully parroted.

For example, should we dismiss as a mere caricature the opinion of the famous Calvinist theologian, R.C. Sproul? This past year, he clearly explained,

Christ did His work on the cross to placate the wrath of God. This idea of placating the wrath of God has done little to placate the wrath of modern theologians. In fact, they become very wrathful about the whole idea of placating God's wrath. They think it is beneath the dignity of God to have to be placated, that we should have to do something to soothe Him or appease Him. We need to be very careful in how we understand the wrath of God, but let me remind you that the concept of placating the wrath of God has to do here not with a peripheral, tangential point of theology, but with the essence of salvation.¹

Or as blogger Tim Challies put it so clearly:

Sin demands justice, justice demands punishment, and punishment is made visible in wrath. A holy God is a just God, a God who judges right from wrong. When he judges something to be wrong he must punish it and the punishment is expressed in wrath.

God's wrath is a holy wrath that is expressed against sin, which is to say, against sinners. That white-hot hatred of sin will be

expressed against those who have defied God. Because the sinner has sinned consciously, he must face this punishment consciously. What is the right length of punishment for a crime of this magnitude? A month of facing God's wrath? A year?

My point is neither to anger nor convert the reformers of the gospel. Nor do I mean to incite contempt in their detractors. I only included

... Was there anything...that required a sacrifice or payment in order to placate...God to forgive sin? No. God is not enslaved by some higher goddess who can prevent him from freely forgiving...

Twenty years? Because of the eternal distance between God and the human sinner, he has committed an infinite, eternal offense and must face this punishment eternally. For God to come up with a sentence less than eternal would be to say that he is less than eternal. The eternity of the punishment is simply a realistic assessment of the never-ending vastness of the difference between us and God.

Thus the just sentence for sinning against this holy, holy, holy God, is to be judged guilty and to eternally, consciously face the wrath of God against sin.²

these citations in order to say, first, the claim that appeasement theology is a caricature is simply untrue.

And second, I reproduced these examples to remind myself that this is precisely what I once learned, believed and taught. Many of my friends and colleagues never went there. But I did.

But my confession includes more than echoing aberrations of cold, cruel theo-logic. Remember, we can also cite many "biblical" objections to a non-retributive Gospel. Herein, I want to attend to just one of

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them—one of my old ace-in-the-hole, deal-killer proof-texts. Ready?

Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22).

That should end the discussion. The prosecution rests, your Honor.

Well it shouldn't. But it did—for me. See, God *can't* just forgive freely—that wouldn't be "just." *Sin must be paid for*. How? Only by the shedding of blood. Because why? Because a blood sacrifice is what God requires, what God needs, what God wants ... and by blood, we mean death. Death of the sinner, or alternatively, a ram, lamb, bull—or a Son. And so we taught, "Sin cannot simply be forgiven. It must be *punished*—by blood, by death—and only through the full payment of that penalty is God justified in forgiving sin."

We taught that. Yes. We did. It's right there in Hebrews 9.

Sorry.

I'm sorry I taught that.

I'm sorry I taught that the Bible teaches that. I'm sorry I didn't acknowledge the context—or even the whole verse. But you know, who wants to mess with an airtight system?

But now the gospel—the beautiful message, the

cruciform God—demands that we step back and see

the bigger picture, the agenda of Hebrews. This won't begin to be exhaustive, but I hope at least to point to a couple trailheads for further study.

1. The LAW requires...

The verse in question (9:22) actually says, "In fact, **the law requires** that nearly everything be cleansed by blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

So first, the shedding of blood is what **the law** requires. And just what is the book of Hebrews about? What are these chapters about?

Isn't the author's argument that our new covenant in Christ is superior to the old covenant of Moses—the *Law*—in every way?

The Law may *demand* one set of things (e.g. death and condemnation—2 Corinthians 3), but Christ (grace and truth! John 1:17) *delivers* something wholly other.

2. The inauguration of two covenants

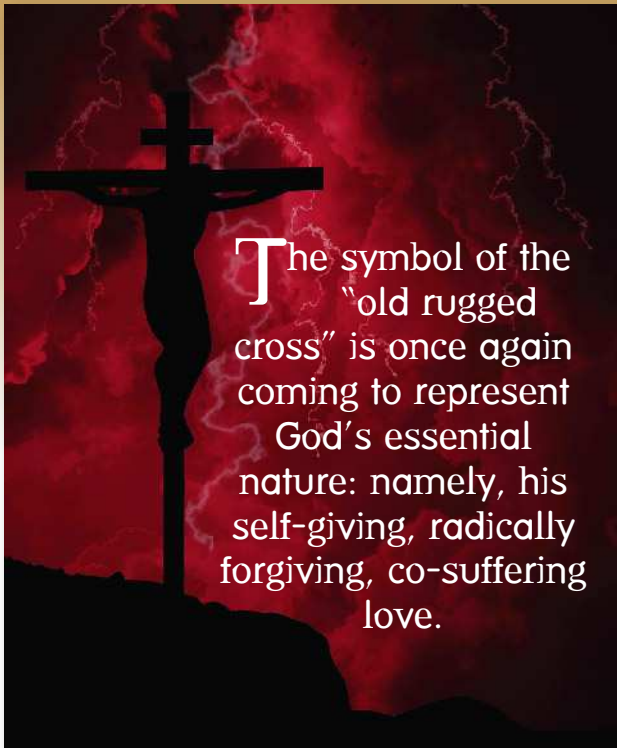
But it's more complex than that, because chapter 9 does seem to draw a parallel between the temple sacrifices (of sheep and bulls) and the heavenly sacrifice of Jesus.

Doesn't the author of Hebrews argue that *just* as the blood of animals was necessary for the shadow ministry of the earthly temple, *how much more* the blood of Jesus was necessary for the reality of the heavenly temple?

Not exactly. Chapter nine is not actually about forgiveness of sins through satisfaction of wrath *at all*. Rather, the chapter specifically recounts the *inauguration* of the two covenants. Moses' sacrifices purified the *old temple precincts* to initiate the old covenant, while Jesus' sacrifice purified the *new temple people* of the new covenant. As Santo Calarco shows at length in his essay, "This verse does not speak to the issue of the forgiveness of personal sins at all. Rather it refers to *the role of blood in the inauguration of priestly ministries*; earthly and heavenly."³

3. Ineffectual sacrifices

Again, the author draws contrasts to emphasize the superiority of Jesus' covenant. The most obvious is that the sacrificial system of Moses' law was *earthly*, while Christ's was *heavenly* (9:23-25). Moses'



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sacrifices had to be repeated in perpetuity, while Christ’s was sufficient once and for all (9:26-10:2). More importantly, Moses’ sacrifices didn’t even work. They were not only repetitious; they were ineffectual.

Note this well: under the law, *without* the shedding of blood, there is *no* forgiveness. But also, under the law, even *with* the shedding of blood, there was *no* forgiveness. Try reading 9:22 and then 10:4 together out loud:

(22) The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness...(3) But...(4) it is *impossible* for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

4. What is necessary versus what God requires

Now we could say (and I did) that while the rigors of the law required animal sacrifices, God’s wrath required a perfect human sacrifice. Is that what

Hebrews is pointing out? Not exactly. Or rather, not even remotely. First, God’s wrath is nowhere in view. Even euphemisms like “God’s justice” are completely absent in this context. This isn’t about that. At all. Second, there is a surprising chasm between “what is necessary” and “what God requires” (as in needs and desires). Was the death of Christ necessary to deliver us from the one who held us in

5. From sacrifice to offering
Further, and more subtly, the book of Hebrews deliberately moves from the language of ‘sacrifice’ of animals to the language of “offering” of Jesus. This is complex and I will leave the gory details to Michael Hardin (cf. *The Jesus-Driven Life*, Appendix 1 on Hebrews). The bottom line is that in Hebrews, even at the level of word usage, whatever sacrifice is being offered, it is first and foremost God-in-Christ’s *self-offering*—not a sacrifice to God in order to placate the angry deity, but rather a self-offering by a loving God to save an estranged people.

Certainly we can speak of the “sacrificial love” of God in

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bondage all our lives through death and the fear of death?

Absolutely. So says Hebrews 2:14-15. Christ had to die in order to enter the grave and overcome death—to emerge victorious from the grave with the keys of death and hades.

But was there anything in the character or nature or heart of God that required a sacrifice or payment in order to placate him—to somehow release God to forgive sin? No.

God is not enslaved by some higher goddess (*Justicia or Dike*) who can prevent him from freely forgiving—that’s the whole point of the book of Hosea. What was *necessary* for God in order to conquer death and what we imagine God *requires* to justify his own grace are entirely different questions.

Christ to speak of his lifework—surely laying down his life was exactly that. And yet Hebrews makes a deliberate linguistic move away from the language of OT *sacrifice* to the language of Jesus’ *offering*. Why does the author do this?

6. The Subversion of Sacrifice

This is where the author pulls out the stops in proclaiming a gospel that entirely subverts sacrifice. Hebrews does not settle for saying that Jesus is merely the superior sacrifice or the ultimate sacrifice. He sees in Jesus’ life and death an offering that exposes and negates the corrupt foundations of sacrifice altogether.

In chapter 10, the author of Hebrews harnesses the prophetic witness of the OT to

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call into question the whole sacrificial system itself. Watch this: he puts the words of the Psalmist into Christ’s own mouth,

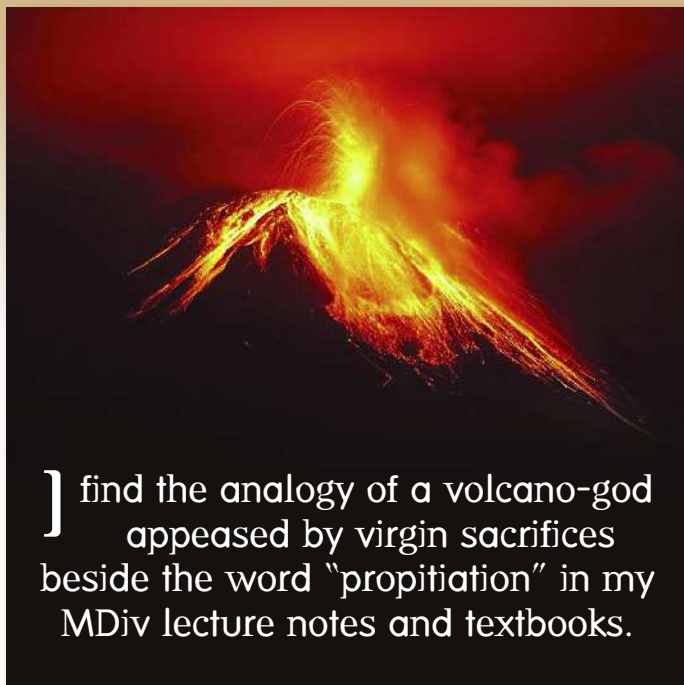
When Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you *did not desire*, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were *not pleased*. Then I said, ‘Here I am...I have come to do *your will*, my God’” (10:5-7).

So the blood of animals is *not* what God wanted (in spite of what *the law* demanded—vs. 8). Then what did what God want? I guess he would only be satisfied by the more potent blood sacrifice of Jesus.

Sort of, but not exactly. Not for any retributive reasons or punitive penchants. Verse 9 continues,

“Then he said, ‘Here I am, I have come to do your will.’ He sets aside the first to establish the second.”

What God desires (not demands) is the *offering of sacrificial obedience* (not sacrifice for sacrifice’s sake) *given in self-giving love and forgiveness*. This is not just the perspective of the author of Hebrews. The author is reminding us that already in the Psalms and Prophets, there is an ongoing, concerted anti-sacrificial critique. God doesn’t need or want animal sacrifices—the sacrifices he wants include a broken and contrite heart, a life of humility and obedience, and a



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society marked by justice and mercy.

Here’s a sample—*please don’t skim this part*:

Psalm 51

16 For You *do not delight in sacrifice*, otherwise I would give it; You are *not pleased with burnt offering*. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

Jeremiah 7

21 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, “Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat flesh. 22 For I *did not speak to your fathers, or command them* in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, *concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices*. 23 But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you will be My people; and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you.’”

Amos 5

21 “I hate, I reject your festivals, Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 “Even though you offer up to Me *burnt offerings and your grain offerings*, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.

23 “Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.

24 “But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Micah 6

6 With what shall I come to the Lord

and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with *burnt offerings*, with yearling calves?

7 Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

8 He has told you, O man, what is good; And *what does the Lord require of you*, but to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (emphasis added).

These are the desires and requirements of God. *NOT* the sacrifices associated with death and violence, but the offering of a God-honoring life. This kind of “sacrifice” was fulfilled most perfectly in the self-offering of Christ—in his God-pleasing life-and-death martyr-witness, even in the face of a corrupt temple establishment.

7. Jesus as High Priest

This signals a crucial shift in

the text. The blood sacrifice that secures forgiveness re-emerges throughout the rest of chapter 10. But from here on, Jesus is now seen as the High Priest who brings the sacrifice (vis-à-vis the victim being sacrificed). Why is this?

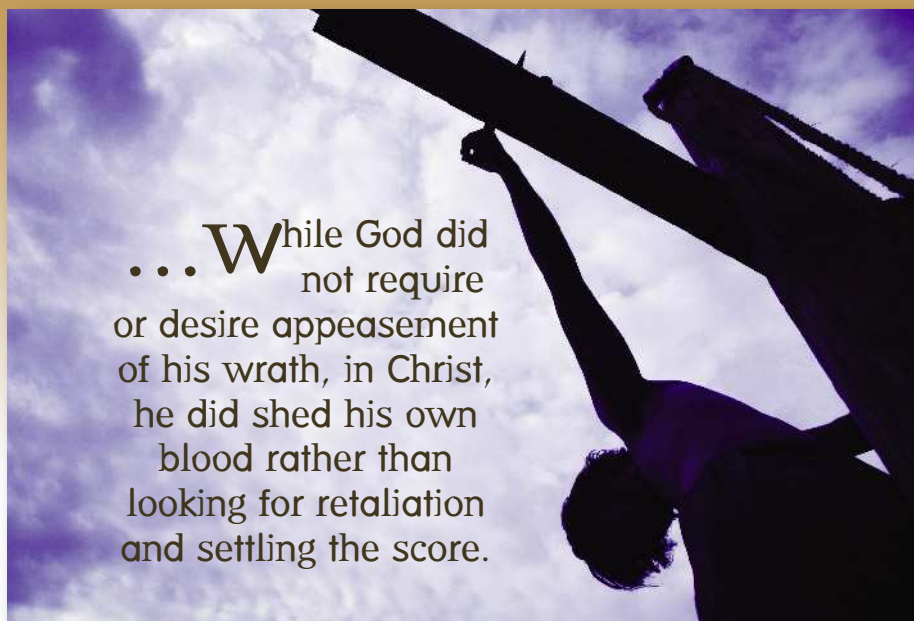
The shift is not at all random and should not be overlooked. Christ has given his whole life in obedience to God—doing justice, loving mercy, proclaiming peace, enacting grace—even to the bitter end, when religion and state do what they do: in a murderous self-preserving plot, they

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choose him as their scapegoat for execution. He becomes the innocent Lamb slain in their illegitimate and unholy sacrifice.

But what does Christ do? In obedience to and partnership with his Father, he overthrows the wickedness of their sacrifice by offering himself as the Father’s agent of redemption, extending forgiveness to all. Thus his blood comes to represent the self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love of God—and not the inherent need for appeasement through violence.

It is *this* blood—the gift of self-giving love—that Christ as High Priest uses to sprinkle clean the new temple and inaugurate the new covenant. It is with *this* blood—his offering of sacrificial forgiveness—that Christ our High Priest enters the Holy of Holies and offers to God. If God is “satisfied,” it is not that his wrath is placated by a



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sufficiently torturous death, but rather, with the pleasure of a life that so beautifully reflected and ministered God’s own heart.

Postscript

When the author of Hebrews says, “The law says...without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness,” on the one hand, he’s making a remark on what has been. In this article, I’ve asked, who requires it? From whom is it required? And why? We’ve seen that the Psalms and the Prophets, and now the book of Hebrews, seriously critiqued the Law’s claim as a wrong perspective. St. Paul goes on to call us to be “living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” making our lives “spiritual acts of worship” (Romans 12:1). I’ve argued that Jesus’ life so fully embodied the kind of offering God is looking for that it ultimately led him to die as he lived—a life poured out in self-giving, radically forgiving,

co-suffering love. This, I would add, is what he meant by “Take up your cross and follow me.” This is what we mean when we sing, “There’s power in the blood.” Somehow, at least symbolically, yes, the shedding of blood is *necessary* and *inevitable* for those who carry that same cross and follow the Way of that same Lamb.

As Brian Zahnd put it to me, “When wrong has been done and forgiveness is a possibility, someone has to bleed and say, “I forgive.” **To follow Jesus is to forgive and bleed.**

Our answer leads us to see that while God did not require or desire appeasement of his wrath, in Christ, he did shed his own blood rather than looking for retaliation and settling the score. This is the cruciform God who would transform us into a cruciform and “Christo-form” people—those who emulate God’s Son in cruciform love. □

1. R.C. Sproul, “What do Expiation and Propitiation Mean?” *Ligonier Ministries* (Apr. 18, 2014).

2. Tim Challies, “The Just Wrath of a Holy God,” *Challies.com* (Aug. 14, 2012).

3. Santo Calarco, “Without the Shedding of Blood—Heb. 9:22,” *Clarion Journal* (Sept. 4, 2013).