



## For Love of the Fallen

**2 Sam 1:17-27; Ps 92:1-4, 12-15; Mk 5:21-43; 2 Cor 8:7-15**

She was unclean. Years had passed since she had been able to participate in public worship, as she was barred from synagogue and temple for ritual impurity. There was no moral association with this condition. Her impurity simply defined that it was not appropriate for her to participate in public worship or intimate relations. She had been plagued with bleeding for twelve long years. For twelve years, anyone she touched was also unclean. They would have to spend the day in ritual cleansing to be allowed once again back into the fold of Israel.

Blood was an important symbol of life and not to be treated lightly. Rules were established to impede abusing blood in fertility cult practices. There were restrictions on eating blood in recognition that life belonged to God and God alone. Life was a gift. Life was on loan. Taking the life in the blood of another to add to one's own vitality was one of the abuses found in the world of witchcraft, sorcery, and fertility cults. It may have been the practice of some, but it was completely taboo for Israel. Life was to be respected as a gift on loan, not as something to abuse and hoard. Her bleeding separated her from worship more than anything to help Israel avoid abusing her condition in fertility rites or to gain special access to God through the voice of her lifeblood in constant flow.

From the spilt blood of Abel on, we see descriptions in Genesis of blood having a voice to gain God's ear. The priests of Ba'al on Mount Carmel cut themselves with knives so the voice of their own blood might mingle with that of the sacrificial animal to gain them divine audience. Life was understood to reside in one's blood. It was abused to gain power over victims or add to one's vitality. Menstruation was a ripe time for the abuse of women whose fertility was in evidence. Torah regulations protected them from becoming the objects of spiritual abuse. There were similar regulations concerning men and contact with a corpse. The restrictions were designed to distance such from the worship of *Yahweh*.

Fertility rites and cults were a constant problem in Israel. Regulations and interpretations in place to distance the Israelites from fertility practices kept this woman at bay from the rest of society. Hers was not the normal experience. Protection became a prison for her. It was a lonely life. Women already spent several days every month in isolation. Physical contact with one who was bleeding extended ritual impurity to the one touching them. Touching one's clothing had the same effect. Women participated in periodic cleansing rituals to rejoin the social order. For this woman, there was no letup. Day in and day out, she was impure and cut off from physical contact with others. She may as well have been a leper.

The healers of her day had tried their best with herbal remedies, teas, potions, special rites, and less appealing attempts to resolve her bleeding. The diseased tissue in her body, however, did not respond to any of the treatment measures available. Chemotherapy might have solved her problems, but such was obviously not available in Jesus' day. There were no CT scans available to isolate the cause of her bleeding toward a remedy the issue. The only effect of treatment efforts had been to bleed her finances dry. She was cut off, penniless, and without hope of restoration. The law which was protection for most had turned her into an outcast.

Then Jesus came into the picture. He had begun his ministry with all sorts of miraculous signs of healing and teaching regarding the presence of God. He was obviously a prophet. Alongside so many in

the crowd following him, she determined he was her best chance to find restoration to life. If anyone could do something for her, Jesus would be the one. After all, he had been healing many whose conditions were hopeless. The problem was how to approach him.

“Hi, I’m ritually unclean,” was not a very good opening line. Her condition was humiliating. The crowds surrounding Jesus would be afraid of contact with her. She might be treated badly if they knew her condition. She would have to approach Jesus somehow through their midst. As a prophet, Jesus would not want to become impure, which contact with her would cause. He would obviously esteem retaining his ritual purity and preparedness for worship above falling by contact with one negatively impacting his ability to approach God. Sure that Jesus was her only remaining hope, she was still uncertain as to whether he would help her. All other avenues for seeking healing and restoration had closed. Jesus was her only hope.

She decided to play it safe. She would keep her condition quiet. She would make her way through the crowd, sidle up to Jesus, reach out, and to touch the hem of his clothing. If nothing happened, she had not lost anything. If she were cured, it would all be worth it. Any other way, she would have to embarrass herself publicly, expose herself to ridicule and shame, and beg for Jesus’ attention and help. She had enough on her plate as it was. She did not have the strength to go through telling her story again. What if she did that and Jesus still could not or would not help her?

Better to slip up to him, touch his clothing, and get on with life. Sure, she would end up touching people in the crowd, they would touch her, and they would all be ritually impure. What would it matter, as long as they didn’t know any better? They would not be tempted to abuse contact with her in fertility rites, as they would never know of her condition. She would just have to pray for God’s forgiveness.

Jesus was already busy when she made her way into the crowd. He was surrounded by the press of people who constantly followed him. Jairus managed to get Jesus’ attention first, after all, he was an important man in the synagogue. Jesus had embarked on a mission to Jairus’ home to heal his daughter. The daughter had been born about the time the bleeding had started. She would not interfere with Jesus’ healing of the girl. She would slip in, touch Jesus’ garments, and then fade away in joy and release or retreat back to her shell of isolation.

Jesus did not let her get away so easily. He stopped the procession to ask who had touched him. Fear and dread came over her. Could she just hide? What would he do on finding out that she had made him ritually impure? She did not come forward right away. Fear held her tongue. When she realized there was no escape, she stepped forward to tell her story.

Jesus’ response was unexpected. He should have been furious. He should have felt abused. It should have struck him as a great offense that she had dared to touch him and communicate her impurity. His response was love and communicating grace. He had come, after all for the fallen among us. He had come for those who would fall prey and victim to those seeking power at the expense of others. He never mentioned concerns of ritual impurity. He simple addressed her faith—her trust that God could handle what no one else could. Grace was available to her, because of God’s love for the fallen. Are we ready to offer grace to those ignored or pushed aside by the routines of life. After all, it was for love of those fallen by the wayside that Jesus came to offer grace in the first place. Will we join him?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*