

# BEHOLD, THE LAMB OF GOD!

John I:29-34

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The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. I:29).

Occasionally, we encounter in Scripture a truly epochal event that changes everything. One of these was the launch of Jesus' public ministry as he was formally identified by John the Baptist. On the previous day, John had spoken of one greater than himself who was coming. On the second day, seeing Jesus walking toward him, John cried, "There he is!" In this important witness, John makes great statements about Jesus' person and work, statements that are central to the gospel message of salvation.

## THE LAMB OF GOD

John's witness provides one of our Lord's most glorious and beloved titles: "Behold," he said, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29).

What does it mean that Jesus is "the Lamb of God?" Scholars debate this, because John does not spell out his exact meaning. But given the background of the Old Testament, there was hardly a need. If there is one prominent image in the Old Testament, it is that of the sacrificial lamb, whose blood was shed for the remission of our sins.

Perhaps the most prominent of the images is the Passover Lamb. In Exodus 12 we learn how God delivered Israel from slavery by sending the angel of death to slay all the firstborn of Egypt. Only the Israelites were offered a way of escaping this wrathful horror. Each family was

to sacrifice an innocent lamb and spread its blood on their doorposts, so that the angel of death would pass over their home. There are many links between Jesus and the Passover lamb. For instance, he was handed over to be crucified at the sixth hour on “the day of Preparation of the Passover” (Jn. 19:14). That was the very hour the Passover lambs were slain throughout Jerusalem. So calling Jesus the “Lamb of God” was John’s way of saying that his blood causes God’s wrath to pass over all those who trust in him.

This is not the only reference to lambs. Under the old covenant, lambs were sacrificed every day to make atonement for sin (see Ex. 29:38-39). Day by day, year by year, lambs were sacrificed in the temple as a perpetual reminder of the peoples’ need for forgiveness. The very morning of the day when John identified Jesus as “the Lamb of God,” a lamb was sacrificed, as was another in the evening.

Furthermore, naming Jesus “the Lamb of God,” undoubtedly alludes to the prophecy of Isaiah 53:6, which foretold the coming of a suffering Savior: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” J. C. Ryle explains, “Christ was the great Sacrifice for sin, who was come to make atonement for transgression by His own death upon the cross.”<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, we remember the great scene in Genesis 22, the earliest direct reference to a sacrificial lamb. At God’s command, Abraham had gone up Mt. Moriah to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Isaac noticed the fire and the wood of an offering and asked, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham replied, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (Gen. 22:7-8). Isaac’s question resounds throughout the Old Testament. It was clear that a lamb must be offered to take away our sin. But where is the Lamb? This is the great question offered by the Old Testament. People realized that no mere animal could take the place of a human, so they would have asked the priests, “Where is the true Lamb who will take away our sins?” The Old Testament comes to an end with no better answer than the one given by Abraham to his son: “God will provide the lamb.” But on that great day beside the Jordan River, John the

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), I:56.

Baptist spied the Lord Jesus coming towards him. He raised his hand and cried aloud the great answer that was centuries in the making, speaking as the last in the great line of the prophets: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

When we understand this statement, we realize the great purpose for which Jesus came into the world. People today wonder about this. “What’s the deal with Jesus?” they ask. In John’s day, people were looking for a spiritual reformer like Elijah or a deliverer like Moses to throw off the Romans. These may have been helpful, but would not answer their most fundamental need, to be cleansed of sin. John’s witness to Jesus tells us why he came into the world: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29).

Do you realize that this is what the world truly needs: to have its sins taken away and be reconciled to God? Do you realize that this is your own great need? Every sinner – every man, woman or child who has broken God’s holy law – and that is every one of us – stands condemned before God’s just wrath. God is rightly opposed to us and not for us. But God nonetheless loves the world, so he sent his only Son to be the Lamb to take away our sin. Ryle explains:

Christ... did not come on earth to be a conqueror, or a philosopher, or a mere teacher of morality. He came to save sinners. He came to do that which man could never do for himself, -- to do that which money and learning can never obtain, -- to do that which is essential to man’s real happiness: He came to “take away sin.”<sup>2</sup>

How did Jesus take away our sin? By taking it onto himself and bearing our punishment upon the cross. Peter, reflecting on Isaiah 53, explains, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24).

This raises the question as to whose sins Jesus came to take away. Some people are impressed by John’s statement that Jesus came “to take away the sin of *the world*,” believing this teaches that all persons in the world are forgiven, regardless of their attitude toward Jesus. That this is not John’s meaning is evident throughout his Gospel. It is those who believe on Jesus – who confess their sin and receive him as Savior and Lord – who are forgiven, and only they. “For God so

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 57.

loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.... [but] whoever does not believe is condemned” (Jn. 3:16, 18).

By speaking of “the world” John is making a contrast with Jewish exclusivism. He is saying that Jesus saves not merely the Jews – as was expected in his day – but also Gentiles, everyone in the world who believes in him. Moreover, as we study the sacrificing of lambs in the Old Testament, we see a progression that is culminated with Jesus as the Lamb of God. At first, the rule was a lamb for each sinful person: this is why Abraham needed a lamb in the place of Isaac. Later, as the time for Jesus’ coming drew nearer, a lamb could be offered for a whole family, as in the Passover. Then, under the old covenant, a lamb was offered for the entire nation of Israel. Finally, Jesus is the Lamb for the whole world, one who as the Son of God has blood of infinite worth and is able to pay the debt of every sinner.

Jesus came to save the world, and though not all sinners will repent and believe – so that not all are saved – he will indeed save the world. This very world, lost and bound in sin, currently dominated by unbelief, will be saved by the precious blood of the Lamb. In the end, when unrepentant sinners are cast out of this world into hell, it will be a renewed, cleansed, and sinless world that sings in praise to the Lamb: “For you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation... and they shall reign on the earth!” (Rev. 5:9-10).

If Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” then he is the Savior every sinner needs. There is no other way to be reconciled to God. In loving grace, the holy God of heaven sent his Son to die as the Lamb for your sins: what then will become of you if you neglect or refuse or despise this Lamb? The old English poet John Donne gives an appeal that is valid still today: “Wash thee in Christ’s blood, which hath this might / That being red, it dyes red soules to white.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the famous arches in Rome celebrates the victory of Emperor Titus when he conquered Jerusalem in A. D. 70. The relief on the inner curve shows Titus returning with his spoils, including the golden

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<sup>3</sup> John Donne, *La Corona*, from *The Complete English Poems*, 436.

altar, the trumpets, and the seven-stemmed lampstand from the temple. Included is a long procession of Jewish slaves brought to be sold in the markets of Rome. When we look at scenes like this, we should remember that this is what we were before the Lamb of God came for us. We were slaves to a tyrant worse than Titus. We were slaves to sin, held captive in the cruel bondage of sin and guilt. But now the Lamb of God has delivered us from our sin.<sup>4</sup> Jesus set us free and entered us into his royal family so that, with him, we now are the victors in the battle he won on the cross. Here is our triumph – what Christ has done as the Lamb of God for us, on whom we simply believe, committing ourselves to him, and are saved. A healthy, spiritually-thriving Christian is one who never forgets that, who never tires to glorify Jesus as “the Lamb of God,” who takes away not only the sin of the world, but also exults, “he took away my sin as well.”

## THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE SPIRIT

John the Baptist had been insisting in Jesus’ total superiority over himself, and this declaration that Jesus is “the Lamb of God” also shows Jesus’ supremacy. John’s baptism had pointed out the need for forgiveness, but Jesus by his death actually cleanses from sin. This is why John never wanted to talk about himself, but only to witness about Jesus. “I came baptizing with water,” he said, “that he might be revealed to Israel” (Jn. 1:31).

Christ’s supremacy is also seen in John’s comparison between his own baptism and the baptism Jesus would bring: “He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’” (Jn. 1:33). This attests to John’s authority in making these great claims about Jesus. This is not his own opinion, but he witnesses to Jesus on the authority of God’s revealed Word. We, likewise, must base our witness on the authority of the Bible, God’s Word to us. God revealed to John that the Spirit came upon Jesus so that he would baptize us not merely with water but with the Holy Spirit.

We will consider baptism with the Holy Spirit in detail next study. But for now we can note what John is saying about Jesus’ ministry. Just as Jesus is superior because he actually forgives our sin, so also

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<sup>4</sup> Illustration cited from Jim Elliff in John H. Armstrong, *The Glory of Christ* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002), 89.

Jesus is superior because he sends the Holy Spirit to deliver us from the power of sin.

By “baptism with the Holy Spirit,” John and the other Gospels are speaking of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church at Pentecost. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus told his disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). This is the transforming effect of Jesus sending his Holy Spirit to baptize his church: they were empowered for holiness and for their witness to the gospel.

The greatest example of this transformation was the apostle Peter. At the Last Supper, when Jesus spoke about his impending arrest, Peter boasted in fleshly confidence about how faithful he would be regardless the cost. But when the test came – when Jesus was arrested and Peter was pegged as one of his disciples – Peter betrayed the Lord. But after his resurrection, Jesus restored Peter. And when the Holy Spirit came upon him at Pentecost, this weak and sinful man was empowered to proclaim the gospel boldly in the very city that had crucified Jesus just weeks before. “This Jesus,” Peter preached, “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:23-24). God used Peter’s preaching to lead thousands to Christ, and in the years to come Peter would fearlessly and faithfully live for Jesus. Having forgiven Peter with his shed blood, Jesus was also able to transform his life through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus baptized the church with the Holy Spirit so that all believers could receive this transforming power. 1 John 3:5 says that Jesus “appeared to take away sins.” But that is not all, for a few verses later, John adds: “The Son of God appeared... to destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8). This means that Jesus came not merely to take away our guilt but to also deliver us from the power of sin in our present lives. This is why Christians are no longer to continue in patterns of sin. Like Peter, when you believe and are born again, the Spirit will come and give you power to live in a way you never did before. Obviously, we sin; John says that if we ever think we have stopped sinning we are only deceiving ourselves (1 Jn. 1:8). But we do not remain slaves to sin. Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you

will be free indeed” (Jn. 8:36). Paul writes, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,” for by the Spirit we “are being transformed into [Christ’s] image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:17-18).

If we wonder what form this takes we need look no further than the Holy Spirit’s visual form as he came upon Jesus Christ. John the Baptist said, “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him” (Jn. 1:32). The dove is a symbol of purity and gentleness. This depicts not only Jesus’ character but also the form the Holy Spirit’s work takes in our lives. To be “spiritual” – that is, to be moved and indwelt by the Holy Spirit – is to be innocent and pure of sin’s influence. Like a dove we are to be pure and meek before God, and gentle in our dealings with other people. This is how Jesus was: he was peaceful and brought no harm. Isaiah said, “The bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench” (Isa. 42:3). Purity, humility, and gentleness are to characterize the Spirit-baptized church and the Spirit-indwelt Christian.

People think of these qualities as signs of weakness, but the Bible sees them as evidence of power. St. Augustine associated the dove that descended on Jesus with the dove Noah sent out from the ark when he landed in the new world that was cleansed by the flood. As the waters of God’s wrath subsided, Noah sent out a dove, and when it returned with an olive leaf in its mouth, “Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth” (Gen. 8:11). St. Augustine comments, “As a dove did at that time bring tidings of the abating of the water, so doth it now of the abating of the wrath of God upon the preaching of the Gospel.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as Noah’s dove signaled the arrival of a new world, cleansed of sin, so also does the dove of the Holy Spirit symbolize the new creation in Christ, the new life cleansed from sin that every Christian begins when he or she trusts in Jesus Christ.

In the hymn *Rock of Ages*, Augustus Toplady puts together the dual work of Christ spoken of in John’s witness. Jesus the Lamb of God takes away the guilt of our sin, and through his baptism with the Holy Spirit, Jesus frees us from the power of sin. This is our deliverance

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<sup>5</sup> Augustin, cf. Ryle, 65.

from sin through Jesus Christ: “Be of sin the double cure / cleanse me from its guilt and power.”<sup>6</sup>

#### TRUSTING, WORSHIPING, AND WITNESSING TO JESUS CHRIST

**H**aving witnessed to Jesus’ work – as Lamb of God and the sender of God’s Spirit – John the Baptist also exalts the Person of Christ.

John tells us two great things about Jesus as a person. The first is an implication of Jesus’ title as “the Lamb of God.” According to the Old Testament, the sacrificial lambs had to be perfectly spotless, without defect or blemish. This was true of Jesus: he was and is perfect in every way, and especially he is pure from any taint of sin. Jesus was qualified to die in our place because he had no sins of his own for which to pay. “God made him who knew no sin to be sin, so that we in him might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Moreover, by calling Jesus “the Lamb of God,” John points out his humble obedience to God’s calling in his life. Isaiah said, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Isa. 53:7). Furthermore, Jesus is a Shepherd who is gentle and kind to his own sheep. Because he made himself one with us, he is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:15).

How else should we respond to this witness but to place our faith in Jesus Christ? Have you done that? If not, what could possibly keep you from believing on Jesus and trusting in him to be your Savior? Is it because you are too proud to admit your sin? Do not deny your sin. Get rid of it by having Jesus Christ take it away! He came into this world to remedy your greatest problem – one which not only burdens you with misery but threatens you with eternal damnation – the problem of your sin. And he is a kind Savior who is tender in his care for all his own. Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved fully, finally, and forever.

John the Baptist concludes his witness, “And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God” (Jn. 1:34). He says in John

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<sup>6</sup> Augustus Toplady, *Rock of Ages*, 1776.

1:33 that, although he knew many things about Jesus, he had not processed all this until God had revealed it to him when the Spirit descended on him as a dove. Matthew's Gospel says that after John baptized Jesus, "a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'" (Mt. 3:17). Jesus later explained that this is only revealed by the Father (Mt. 16:17), so this is how John the Baptist learned it. Now, having been taught by God, he says, "This is the Son of God" (Jn. 1:34).

If Jesus' saving work calls for us to trust him as Savior, Jesus' divine person calls for us to exalt him as Lord. This is what we see John the Baptist continually doing. If by God's grace we have understood who Jesus is, we will worship and serve him with all our hearts.

If we do that, then there will be one last way that we will follow the example of John the Baptist: we will tell others about Jesus. We, too, will point to Jesus and declare, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." To this we will add, "This is the Son of God," and we will invite others to join us in worship and trust in him.

Do we appreciate just how important our witness is? John the Baptist did. Jesus has come, but the world does not know him. The world does not realize that he is the only solution to its greatest need. So we must tell them who he is and what he did. The evangelical movement was once made great by its passion to spread this gospel to the farthest corner of the globe. Now, when most are unwilling even to tell our neighbors, we have become weak and many who might be saved are lost. People cannot know Christ and his gospel unless we point him out: "Behold, the Lamb of God!" May God, by the outpouring of his Spirit, cause us to bear witness to a dying world of its only Savior, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29).