

John's Gospel - Looking at the Lamb of God

by John Vissers

John the Baptist's declaration of Jesus as the Lamb of God reveals the significance of this title, which represents deliverance from sin and death, atonement and propitiation, and the power and glory of the victorious Messiah.

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Topics: "Lamb Of God"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on John 1:29, where John the Baptist declares Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The sermon begins by highlighting the context of this declaration, which is the day after John had been interrogated by religious leaders. The preacher then draws a parallel between this declaration and the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22, where Abraham believed that God would provide the lamb for sacrifice. The sermon concludes by emphasizing that Jesus is the true Lamb of God who can deliver people from death and bondage, referencing 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 where Paul also refers to Jesus as the Passover lamb.

Transcript

Please turn with me to our scripture reading for this evening as we continue in our studies of John's Gospel. Tonight we come to verses 29 to 35, 34 actually, of the first chapter of John's Gospel. I invite you to follow along in your own Bible or in the Pew Bible in front of you as we read God's inspired, God's infallible word to us, praying that the Holy Spirit will speak to us through these scriptures.

Let us hear the word of God. The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is the one I meant when I said a man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.

I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel. Then John gave this testimony. I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.

I would not have known him except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God. So far, the reading of God's word tonight.

May he follow this reading with the presence of his Spirit and instruct us in its meaning. Let's pray together, shall we? Lord, we give thanks tonight for your word. Your word which gives us light on the journey.

Your word which guides us in the way of truth. Your word which reveals to us Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. And tonight, O God, we pray that you would speak to us through your word.

Speak to our minds and speak to our hearts and speak to our souls. That as we hear your word, as we study it together, indeed we might be pointed to Jesus Christ in a new and in a fresh way. Particularly as we prepare to come to this table.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen. Tonight, as we approach the Lord's table, I want to take really just one verse out of the text that we've read tonight and focus on it.

And it's the 29th verse of the first chapter of John's Gospel. The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, Behold, or look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Notice that the text starts very simply by saying, The next day.

It is now the next day. The day before that day was the day that John had been interrogated by the religious leaders, by the delegation that had been sent from Jerusalem out to find out who he was and what he was doing and what his ministry was all about. And you'll remember we looked at that passage a few weeks ago.

They came to him and he did not fail to confess, it says in verse 20, but confessed freely, I am not the Christ. Then they asked him, Who are you? Are you Elijah? I am not. Are you the prophet? No.

Finally they said, Who are you? Give us an answer so that we can take it back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? And John replied, verse 23, I am the voice of one calling in the desert, make straight the way for the Lord. And then in verse 27 he says, I am the one, the one who points to the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am worthy to untie.

That was the day before. It's now the next day. And the next day, John the Baptist sees Jesus coming toward him and the first words out of his mouth are not, there comes my cousin.

He was, of course, a cousin of John the Baptist. He does not say, this is the one that I spoke to the religious leaders about, at least not in those words, not at this point. The first words out of his mouth are, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

What interesting words, these first words out of the mouth of John the Baptist. Why did he say that? Why were those the first words out of his mouth as he saw Jesus coming toward him? Why were those words found upon his lips? Why did he point to Jesus and say, look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The question I want us to think about tonight is simply that question.

What did John mean by these words? What did those words mean to those who would have heard him as he stood there out on the street or by the side of the road, as they heard these words, perhaps down by the river, wherever they were. What would the people have thought? What does it mean to refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God? What is the significance of this title? And as we think about what John meant and as we think about what those first hearers heard and what they must have understood, I want us to think in our own minds and in our own hearts, what does it mean to think about Jesus as the Lamb of God? What

does it mean for our faith to think about Jesus as the Lamb of God? It's an image that is somewhat foreign to us, as I was mentioning this morning. Sheep and shepherds are common in ancient Israel and common in other parts of our world today, but they're not so common to us.

So what does it mean for us to think about Jesus as the Lamb of God? What difference does it make in our lives, and how does it help us understand the meaning of the Lord's Supper? There are three images, or three pictures, or three ways of understanding this phrase that I think we need to have before us tonight as we hear these words on the lips of John the Baptist. They provide the background to this title for Jesus, and I want to take just a few minutes to explain each of these themes or each of these images as we reflect together on the meaning of the Lamb of God. The first is simply this.

John, without a doubt, had in mind the Passover Lamb of the Old Testament and the Passover Lamb which was common in his own day. In fact, as John said these words, it is quite possible that there may have been passing by him flocks of lambs, flocks of sheep that were being driven by shepherds up to Jerusalem, up toward the walls of Jerusalem where they would have been sold and where families would have come and bought their lamb for the Passover feast. The reason that I suggest this as a possibility is because if you go to chapter 2 and verse 13 of John's Gospel, you'll discover that the feast of the Passover was not far off.

And so it's entirely possible, in fact, it's more than possible, most commentators say it's certain, that as John referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God, the feast of the Passover was about to unfold in the midst of Jerusalem. And so as John the Baptist points to Jesus and says the Lamb of God, there may have been flocks of sheep and lambs going by. There may have been a family or groups of families, a father and a mother with young children carrying the lamb that they were taking up to Jerusalem, their lamb, that would enable them to celebrate the feast together.

And so in the minds of those people who heard these words from John the Baptist, there was richness to the meaning of his words. It was not hard for them to understand. They would think of the Passover meal and they would think of that great moment in the history of Israel when the Lamb became important to them, when the Lamb became foundational to their identity as the people of God, the very center of their history.

All that they were had to do with this Passover Lamb. And year after year after year after year after year without interruption in Israel, families would gather to eat the Passover Lamb. Now the story of the Passover, of course, is told in Exodus 12, and it's simply this, and it's well-known, I think, to most of you.

It was the blood of the slain Lamb which protected the houses of Israel on the night when they left Egypt. And on that night, the angel of death went across Egypt and killed the firstborn of every family in Egypt. But the Israelites were to smear the doorposts of their houses with the blood of a slain Lamb, and the angel, seeing this, would pass over their houses, and they would be saved.

And, of course, this became the turning point. This became the final moment which led to their liberation, which led to their redemption, which led to their deliverance, which enabled Moses finally to lead them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. And so the blood of the Passover Lamb delivered the people from death and opened the way for freedom and new life.

And John the Baptist is saying, Behold the Lamb of God! Behold Jesus, who is the one true Lamb, who can deliver you from death, who can deliver you from bondage, who can set you free once and for all. And

lest you think that I'm reading too much into these words of John, do you remember the words of the Apostle Paul? In 1 Corinthians chapter 5, verses 7 to 8, where he picks up this same theme and he says, For Christ, our Passover Lamb, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us keep the feast not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

And I want to suggest to you as we come tonight to the Lord's table, we need to come with this picture, with this image, with this vision of the Passover Lamb before us. Because this is the place of our redemption. This is the place of our deliverance.

This is the place where Jesus wants to work in our lives and set us free from the bondage of sin and self and all those things that hold us back from being all that God wants us to be and all that God desires us to be. For some of you tonight, this may be a night where you need to allow Jesus to set you free for the first time in your life, to allow him to do his work of liberation, to set you free from sin, to accept him as Savior so that you might be set free. For others of you who are believers and have been believers for many years, you need to experience the liberty of the children of God in a fresh and in a new way as you come to this table.

We come to this table not with presumption, but also not in despair, but we come with the promise that Jesus here sets us free. He is the Lamb of God, the Lamb of God once slain for all. And through his death, we experience the glorious freedom of the children of God.

But there's a second image and a second picture that we also have to have before us if we're going to understand John the Baptist's words correctly. As John spoke these words and as the people heard him, the image of a sacrifice of atonement most certainly would have been in their minds. Jesus is being spoken of here as the sin-offering Lamb.

Now, you need to remember that John the Baptist was the son of a priest. Do you remember his father was Zechariah? His mother was Elizabeth. Zechariah was a priest in the temple.

And you need to remember that, that John the Baptist was a pique, a priest's kid. And he grew up in the temple. He knew the routines.

He knew the rituals. He knew the daily schedule of the temple. He knew what his father did day in and day out as his father served in the temple.

He grew up there, and he knew that every morning and every evening, as long as the temple stood, a sacrifice of atonement, a sacrifice of a Lamb, took place in the temple for the sins of the people. And this happened day in and day out and month in and month out and year in and year out, even when Jerusalem was under siege, even when there was famine, even when there was war. It happened every day.

The sacrifice of atonement. Until, of course, finally in A.D. 70, a number of years later, the temple in Jerusalem was finally destroyed, and the sacrifice of atonement in the Jewish faith ceased at that time with the destruction of the temple. But John the Baptist knew about the sacrifice of atonement.

And this was the sacrifice that had been formalized in the Levitical system of the Old Testament. And this sacrifice meant a number of things, and let me just remind you concerning its meaning. First of all, the sacrifice of atonement was what we call a propitiation.

A big word. That can be the million-dollar word for tonight. Propitiation.

It means to appease. It means to satisfy. And the idea is simply this, that in our sin, we offend a holy God.

In our sin, we betray the love of a loving God. And propitiation is that which satisfies the judgment of God upon sin. In our offense against God, we deserve to be judged.

A sacrifice of atonement, a sacrifice which is a propitiation, appeases or satisfies the holiness and the righteousness and the justice of God. And the wrath of God against sin and the judgment of God against evil is appeased. It is a propitiation.

But a sacrifice of atonement is more than that. It's also what we call an expiation, another big word which simply means cleansing. A washing away of sin.

You see, what happens in the sacrifice of atonement in the Old Testament is this, that as the blood is shed, not only is the wrath of God satisfied, not only is the judgment of God against sin dealt with, but also the sin itself is cleansed. It is washed away. It is taken care of.

It is a cleansing agent. And I want to suggest to you that that's a powerful picture of what the blood of Jesus does for us. Because many of us find that sin pollutes our lives.

And it's a powerful picture, really, of sin and evil. It pollutes our lives. It inhabits our lives.

And no matter what we try to do ourselves, we never seem to be able to get out from underneath its stain. We always feel somehow a little dirty, implicated in the evil of the world, either directly or indirectly, by what we do and by what we do not do, by what happens to us and by what we do to others. And I find in our psychologized culture today that this picture is very powerful.

People want to be clean somehow. They want to be cleansed. And that's the picture which is given to us of a sacrifice of atonement.

Do you remember Lady Macbeth after the murder? She can't get the bloodstains off her hands. She can't get rid of them. She wants to get rid of them, but she realizes she can't get rid of them.

The blood of Jesus cleanses us from sin. So it's a propitiation. It's an expiation.

But it's also a substitution, of course. The Lamb is sacrificed in the place of the people. The priest offers the sacrifice as a sacrifice of atonement in substitution for the sins of the people.

They should have died. But the Lamb dies in their place. And it is an atonement.

That's also a big word, but it simply means at-one-ment, to bring together, to reconcile two parties which are at enmity. And what the blood of Jesus does is that it brings together God and the sinner because the sinner is cleansed and the sinner is forgiven. And John is saying, a Lamb is offered in the temple every morning and every evening, offered for the sins of the people of Israel, but now look, here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

He is a propitiation. He is an expiation. He is a substitute.

He is a sacrifice of atonement, and not only for the sins of Israel, but for the sins of all who will receive him. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And no doubt, in the minds of John the Baptist

and those who heard him, were also ringing other marvelous Old Testament texts.

Think, for example, of Genesis chapter 22. Do you remember the story? When Abraham takes his son Isaac willingly to offer him as a sacrifice and they make their way up the mountain and Isaac doesn't really know what's going on and Abraham's only told him that they're going up to make a sacrifice and Isaac says to his father Abraham, Father, where is the Lamb which we are going to offer as a burnt offering? Do you remember what Abraham said? The Lord will provide the Lamb. The Lord will provide the Lamb.

And John the Baptist now says behold the Lamb of God provided by God to take away the sins of the world. And think, of course, of the great prophet Isaiah in the 53rd chapter who describes the Messiah, the suffering servant as a Lamb led to the slaughter. We are the sheep that went astray and think of this image.

Isaiah says we are the sheep that went astray but he is the Lamb that is led to the slaughter. We are the ones who went and turned to our own way but he is the one who makes his way up to Calvary and is crucified there for us. All we like sheep have gone astray but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

And John the Baptist is saying here he is the Lamb of God, the suffering servant, the Messiah the Lamb the Lord will provide promised to Abraham and Isaac. Here he is, the sacrifice of atonement the Lamb of God. Do you see him? The Lamb who stands in your place.

And then finally there's a third image that I want us to see. And this is an image that may not at first be readily apparent to you but there is another image which would have been familiar to those who heard John although it may seem strange to us at first but it is profoundly biblical and it is profoundly important that we also have this image before us as we come to this table tonight. In the first century the idea of the Lamb was closely associated with the expectation that the Messiah was soon going to come.

The people of the first century lived with the expectation that the Messiah's arrival was imminent that it would happen any day there was rampant speculation about who the Messiah might be and about when he might come but everyone expected that he would come soon and with that expectation came the expectation and the hope that they would all be delivered from Roman oppression that they would be set free they expected a Messiah who would come and who would lead them out of bondage once again who would be a conquering hero who would be celebrated who would be majestic and glorious who would be the victor and the symbol of this great conquering Messiah was interestingly and somewhat ironically a horned Lamb. A Lamb, yes but a Lamb with horns on the one hand the picture of a Lamb reminding them of gentleness of meekness, of weakness and on the other hand a Lamb reminding them of power and glory and majesty and strength and victory and yes, even judgment. The expectation was that the Lord would raise up the weak so that they might overcome and this was all taken up in the picture of the conquering Lamb of God and so the Messiah was to be the conquering Lamb the Lamb upon the throne the Lamb who would bring judgment upon the wicked and who would bring salvation to the righteous the Lamb who would bring an end to the present age and the Lamb who would usher in the Kingdom of God a Kingdom of Righteousness forever and ever.

And if you haven't got the picture in your mind yet and if you haven't got the point yet then fast forward in your mind to the last book of the Bible the book of Revelation and what do you find in the book of Revelation? You find a picture of Jesus as the Lamb of God upon the throne. Yes, He is the Lamb of Isaiah 53 who suffers and submits to the slaughter but He is also the risen one He is also the glorious one He is also the one who holds the staff in His hand the Lamb upon the throne the conquering hero and do

you know that the book of Revelation and I went through and checked this the book of Revelation refers to Jesus 29 times in this way as the Lamb of God. And in Revelation chapter 5 the angel sang with that glorious hymn Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.

To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever. And in the book of Revelation we find this mixed metaphor almost this strange juxtaposition of words the wrath of the Lamb. Have you ever reflected on that phrase in the book of Revelation? The wrath of the Lamb.

Here you have a picture of a Lamb which depicts for us everything that is gentle and meek and mild and yet here you have a description of the wrath of the Lamb. And I want to suggest to you that Jesus is not just the suffering sacrificial Lamb of God which He most certainly is. The sacrifice of atonement.

The Passover Lamb to set us free. But He is also the Lamb upon the throne. And as we come to this table tonight we need to understand that He is the Lamb of God sacrificed for us but He is also the Lamb of God who was risen from the dead.

The conquering hero who sits upon the throne whose right it is to rule who one day will come again and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father. John the Baptist says behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Do you see Him tonight? Wherever you are in your journey of faith do you see the Lamb of God? The one who wants to set you free.

The one who died in your place. The one who wants to reign as Lord of your life so that indeed you will not feel the wrath of the Lamb but the saving power of Jesus in your life. As some of you know, we were in Europe this summer and on the roof of a church in Werden, Germany apparently, I didn't see this but apparently you can see the stone carving of a Lamb it's on the roof of this particular church in this town and there's a story behind how a Lamb was carved into the roof of that church a man apparently was working on the roof of this church when the safety rope that secured him broke and he tumbled down off the roof of that church and down into the courtyard of the church below and the courtyard was filled with all kinds of blocks and stones but somehow some sheep, a few lambs got into the courtyard and were nibbling and grazing on some of the grass and what happened is that this man who fell down off this roof instead of falling onto one of these stones or falling onto the ground and most certainly being killed he landed on top of one of the sheep he landed on top of one of the lambs and the fall was broken and his life was saved and he walked away with almost no injuries and in gratitude in gratitude for saving his life he got back up on that roof and he carved a Lamb out of stone and he placed it there and he placed it there as a gracious memorial to the Lamb who had saved his life one can only imagine whether in his own mind he also knew that he was portraying a gospel truth that it is the Lamb of God who saves us as we celebrate the Lord's Supper tonight let us hear afresh these words of John look, behold, do you see him? the Lamb of God who takes away your sin and my sin as we come in faith and repentance let us pray Lord Jesus, we confess tonight that you are the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world help us to eat and to drink to your glory and help us to open our lives in a fresh way to the reality of your saving grace Amen

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