

The Lamb of God

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part series

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John 1:19-34 (NIV2011)

¹⁹Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."

²¹They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

²²Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

²⁴Now the Pharisees who had been sent

²⁵questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

²⁸This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' ³¹I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

³²Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.

³³And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."



The Lamb of God

This triumphal depiction of the Lamb of God, *Agnus Dei*, is the most complex of the symbols in the Rose Window. The lamb, which had long been used in sacrificial rites by the Jews, came to represent Jesus Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross.

The standing lamb, holding the banner, with the golden circle around its head represents Christ's sacrifice and his victory over death. Perhaps the New Testament passage that best captures this depiction of the Lamb of God is from Revelation 5:

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹²singing with full voice,

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

Indeed, this praise of God's worthy Lamb is the closing chorus in Handel's *Messiah*!

Come to the banks of the Jordan river and meet the Lamb of God.

The first two weeks of this series focused on the testimony of John the disciple and gospel writer. Now, John turns our attention to the testimony of another John, the baptizer.

It was about 27AD, and John had gone out to the Jordan River, preaching the coming of God's kingdom and urging his fellow Jews to come out to the river to be washed in the river's water, symbolizing their repentance of sin and their cleansing of its stain. Since the time of Joshua, more than a millennium before, the Jordan had been a potent symbol of Israel's freedom and the people's allegiance to the LORD God.

Not surprisingly, John attracted a lot of attention. So much so that the High Priest sent some representatives out to see John. The Baptizer willingly told them that he was neither

the Messiah nor Elijah. Rather, he was the one spoken of in the scroll of Isaiah, the one who would prepare the way for the coming of the LORD (see Isaiah 40:1-11). John told his questioners that he was not even worthy to tie the sandals of the one who was coming. The questioners left and the next day, John saw Jesus of Nazareth coming to him. John stopped what he was doing, pointed at Jesus and said for all to hear:

“Look the Lamb of God,¹ who takes away the sin² of the world.”

How did John know that Jesus, a relative of John’s, was the “Lamb of God”? Apparently, John had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River some time earlier; for John went on to tell the crowd what he saw when he had baptized Jesus. John told them that this man, Jesus, was the reason John had called people out to the river. John had seen the Spirit descend on Jesus in the Jordan river and remain on him. Further, God had revealed to John that Jesus was “God’s Chosen One.”

The key element in John the Baptizer’s testimony is that Jesus is the “Lamb of God,” with all its layers of meaning. Making better sense of this has to begin with a look at the place of sheep and lambs in the story of God and his people.

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep” (Ezekiel 34:15)

Sheep have been domesticated for more than 8000 years and need humans more than any other farm animal. Indeed, they are hyper-domesticated. Even more so than other animals, sheep need human care for food, water, and defense from predators. There are no known instances of domesticated sheep surviving in the wild. Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that one of the dominant biblical portraits of God is the Good Shepherd. The most famous reference to this portrait is the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Here, the psalmist

even speaks as a sheep. Sheep will not drink from streams, only from pools; therefore, “he leads me beside still waters.” Sheep will not lower their heads into buckets or troughs; thus the shepherd ensures that, “my cup overflows.” Sheep are an ideal surrogate for human weakness and the helplessness of innocents – in dire need of a loving shepherd.³

This recurrent theme of a good shepherd and his flock make all the more poignant God’s command to the Israelites that they were to spread the blood of a slaughtered lamb on their doorways so that the death coming for the first-born of Israel would pass over the households of God’s people (see Exodus 12). The notion of animal sacrifice wasn’t new to the Israelites; God’s covenant with them provided for the slaughtering of lambs on several occasions each year. For us however, few parts of the Old Testament seem more foreign than this business of sacrifice.

Sacrifice

Few topics are more perplexing and disturbing to modern-day Christians than the biblical perspective on sacrifice. Sure, we can handle

Old Testament Sacrifice

N.T. Wright suggests that there are two keys that can lead us to a better understanding of sacrifice in the Old Testament.

First, when we bring a symbol of God’s creation to God, we are acknowledging that this is God’s world, not ours. There is no more potent symbol of God’s creation than life. Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that the practice of animal sacrifice has been common to human culture.

Second, the practice of sacrifice is rooted in the deep human awareness that things are not right – that we do the things we shouldn’t and fail to do what we should. Sacrifice is a way of putting things right and healing the human conscience.

But, of course, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). Rather, “it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified [made holy] through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:10).

¹The phrase, “Lamb of God” is found only twice in the Bible, here and in 1:36. John probably intends it to refer to both the sacrificial lamb and the triumphant lamb depicted in Revelation 5.

² Notice that “sin” here is singular not plural. “Sin” here is not just the individual transgressions nor even their sum, but the beast that imprisons us and holds us in bondage.

³ from John Miles’ entry, “Lamb,” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday, 1992.

talking about sacrifice in the sense of giving something up, but all the stuff about blood and animals and death can be very upsetting. We want to relegate it to an ancient time and culture that has little to do with us. Yet, unless we confront blood sacrifice, much of the Bible simply won't make sense.

It isn't an overstatement to say that the New Testament is an extended reflection on the meaning of Jesus' death in light of the Jewish scriptures. Why did he die? More to the point, why didn't he save himself? Who was he – really? Was anything accomplished by his horrifying and humiliating death on a Roman cross? What do we really make of this Lamb of God? What does Jesus' death, symbolized by the cross, mean for us?

From the beginning, Jesus' followers used and expanded upon the Jewish imagery of blood sacrifice. God's covenant with the Jews provided several rituals in which the sacrifice of an animal was used to deal with sins in such a way that the people could be restored to right relationship with God and their consciences healed.

With Jesus though, all this becomes something new. At the beginning of John's Gospel, upon seeing Jesus, John the Baptist exclaims "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Then a few years later, Jesus' last week before his death is Passover week. At the Last Supper, sharing the bread and cup set the stage for the breaking of Jesus' body and the shedding of his blood. Like the silent lamb of Isaiah 53:7, Jesus won't even defend himself (John 19:9). The legs of the Passover lamb were to be left unbroken (Exodus 12:46); hence, Jesus' legs are not broken by the soldiers (John 19:36).⁴ As the writer of Hebrews puts it, Jesus' death is the final and perfect sacrifice to which all the Old Testament sacrifices pointed.

The triumph of the Lamb

Grasping the full weight of John's pronouncement that Jesus is the Lamb of God also takes us to the powerful images in the fifth chapter of Revelation.

In his vision, John (yet another John!) has been whisked away to the throne room of God, where God is attended by four cherubim and twenty-four elders who are worshipping God. Yet, amidst this worship there is soon mourning and tears. The one on the throne holds a scroll that, unlike most papyri, is written on front and back. It is sealed with seven seals, which signifies that the seal is completely and utterly closed, for seven is the number of completion and totality. What does the scroll contain? We are not told. It could be God's plan for creation or it could be the rest of the book. Whatever the scroll contains, there is no one, in all the heavens and the earth, who is worthy to open it and John weeps because the scroll will remain closed.

Then, one of the twenty-four elders comes to John and tells him that the Lion of Judah is worthy to open the scroll. Thus, we'd expect that John would turn to see a lion, the Davidic symbol of power and strength, standing ready to open the scroll.

Yet, when John turns, he doesn't see a lion at all. He sees a lamb. But not a cute, white, leaping little lamb. John sees a Lamb standing there as if it had been slaughtered! This is such a powerful moment in Revelation. John *hears* "Lion" but *sees* "Lamb." The contrast couldn't be more striking. It is Jesus, who embodies them both, the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God.

We think we know what power and might are, but Jesus Christ has revealed that the truth is far from our expectation. It is the Lamb who conquers. Craig Koester writes, "What John *hears* about the Lion recalls promises from the Old Testament, and what he *sees* in the lamb reflects the crucifixion of Christ. Both images point to the same reality. According to the Old Testament, God promised to send a powerful and righteous ruler. These promises are

⁴ Roman execution squads would often, mercifully, break the legs of those being crucified in order to hasten their death. The broken legs would prevent the person from being able to push themselves up on the cross to keep breathing. Typically, suffocation was the cause of death on a cross.

not rejected but fulfilled through the slaughtered yet living Lamb, who is not a hapless victim but a figure of royal strength.”⁵

And strong the Lamb certainly is. The Lamb has seven eyes, all-seeing and all-present (see Zechariah 4:10), and seven horns, all-powerful, as horns were ancient symbols of kingly power. In Revelation, there are twenty-eight references to the exalted Lamb. It is the victorious Lamb of God from the end of the book who stands at the center of our Rose Window.

The Lamb then takes the scroll from the hand of God, causing all the elders and cherubim to fall down before the Lamb in worship, singing their acknowledgement that the Lamb, and the Lamb alone, is worthy to open the scroll.

Then angels too numerous to count join the elders and the cherubim in their worship of the Lamb. The crescendo presses forward as all the creatures in all the cosmos join in the praise of the one seated on the throne and of the Lamb.

Testimonies

We’ve now heard the testimony of John the disciple and gospel writer and of John the Baptizer. We’ve been told that Jesus is:

- God, creator and giver of life,
- A man who came to be baptized by John in the Jordan river and the true light of the world
- The Lamb of God and his chosen one. The one for whom Israel had been waiting a very long time.

In our next study, the last drawn from John’s first chapter, we will hear the testimony of Jesus’ first disciples and that of Jesus himself. We will be well on our way to grasping the portrait of Jesus that the gospel writer paints for us, his portrait of our Lord and Savior.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. This week’s study focuses on John the Baptizer’s unforgettable exclamation: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”
 - a. Begin by talking about this word “sin.” What do you think John means by it? Why is it singular? Don’t we usually talk about “sins”? Whose sin is John talking about?
 - b. The “Lamb of God” is one of the most arresting and important images in the Bible. Discuss what has meant to you in the past, if anything. What do you think John means by it? You might have someone from the group read aloud Isaiah 53:4-9.
2. The biblical image of the Lamb of God is grounded in the practice of animal sacrifice. Of course, we don’t sacrifice animals and God certainly doesn’t want us to start. Any purpose it might have served has been fulfilled in Jesus’ death on the cross. Nonetheless, the language of sacrifice, in the sense of self-giving love, is woven throughout the New Testament. What sacrifices are we called on to make? Do we? What sacrifices do we call on others to make, perhaps on our behalf? What are some examples of selfless sacrifice that we might make? As disciples of Jesus, what barriers stand in the way of our own imitation of Christ?
3. Take a moment and read Philippians 2:1-11. In verse 4, Paul urges us to put others interests ahead of our own; that, in this, we will have the mindset of Jesus. What would our lives be like if we truly put others interests ahead of our own, if we lived sacrificially in this way? Would we end up feeling like we were being taken advantage of? Of course, wasn’t Jesus “taken advantage of?” Do we really even want to be more Christlike if self-sacrifice is what it entails?

⁵ From Koester’s excellent book, *Revelation and the End of All Things*.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 11:1-12:28 The final plague and the Passover lamb.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Isaiah 1:11-17; Micah 6:6-8 What does God really want? Our sacrifices or our hearts?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Ezekiel 34 God and the shepherds of Israel.</p>	<p>Thursday, Hebrews 10 The old sacrifice is contrasted with the new, the perfect, sacrifice of Jesus Christ.</p>
<p>Friday, Revelation 4 & 5 The throne room of God, the scroll, and the Lamb</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

