

“Behold the Lamb of God!”

Isaiah 49:1-7 • Psalm 40:1-11 • 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 • John 1:29-42

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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“Behold the lamb of God!” So said John the Baptist, speaking about Jesus, in the gospel of John. He said it twice, on consecutive days, around the time when Jesus was beginning his ministry and starting to gather disciples, shortly after his baptism. The question is – *what does it mean?*

“The Lamb of God.” Nobody else in all of scripture is called this. No one before or after Jesus has ever been given that title. John just looked at Jesus and declared, “Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” It makes me wonder, first of all, how John knew that this was an appropriate title for Jesus, and secondly, whether anyone who heard him understood what it meant. When John says it the second time, two of John’s disciples were standing right there. Those men stopped following John that day, and started following Jesus instead. One of them, we are told, was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. The other is not clearly specified, but Christians have long thought that it was probably John the Evangelist, the man who ultimately wrote the Gospel that bears that name. These two *stopped following John the Baptist and started following Jesus instead*. Why? Because of the words that John the Baptist said: “Behold the Lamb of God.” Here is how scripture records it: “The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus....” (John 1:35-37) *All it took for those two men to decide to follow Jesus were the words, “Behold the Lamb of God!”* Those words changed *everything* for them. Those words had *power*.

So we are clearly dealing here with some very special words: “*The Lamb of God*.” Which again brings us to the question: *what did those words mean?* What made those words so incredibly special? To answer that, we have to take a look back to the Old Testament. Where do we find anything in the *Old Testament* that might give us a clue what these words mean in the *New Testament*?

There are three passages that give us some clues. The first is in the book of Genesis, chapter 22, in the story of the binding of Isaac. This is the famous story in which God gives Abraham instructions to sacrifice his son Isaac on a particular mountaintop. At the very last moment, just before Abraham made the killing blow, God intervened and told Abraham not to do it after all. In the midst of this story is a very interesting verse. As they are making their way to the mountaintop, young Isaac asks his father, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Genesis 22:7) Abraham replies, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” (Genesis 22:8) Sure enough, when Isaac is bound atop the altar and is about to die, when God tells Abraham to stop, “Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.” (Genesis 22:13) So God indeed provided the lamb ... or, wait a second ... God provided a *ram*. Are a *lamb* and a *ram* the same

thing? No. No, they're not. Not in English, nor in the original Hebrew. A ram is an adult male sheep. A lamb is a young sheep. They're both sheep, but a ram, by definition, is not a lamb. God didn't provide a *lamb*; God provided a *ram*. That worked perfectly fine for Abraham's purposes – "Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son" – but Abraham's earlier words were prescient: "God himself will provide the *lamb* for a burnt offering." Yes, indeed. God *would*, much later on, provide the *lamb* for a burnt offering. God would provide the lamb called *Jesus*.

That's our first clue. The second comes from the story of the first Passover in the book of Exodus. The Israelites are in Egypt, enslaved by Pharaoh. God has sent Moses to liberate them, and has brought upon Egypt a series of plagues. One final plague is coming, more terrible than all the rest, that will affect every household across the whole land, except those marked in a certain way. God says to Moses: "Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household.... Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.... You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn with fire. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord. I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt." (Exodus 12:3-13) To save themselves, each Israelite household has to sacrifice a lamb. The blood of that lamb is what saves the people of God.

Passover became an annual celebration for the people of Israel, one of the great festivals that took place every year. Jewish families would travel to Jerusalem, and each household would offer its own Passover sacrifice – bringing a lamb to the temple, where it would be slaughtered, on a specific day, in the afternoon, just hours before the beginning of Passover at sundown. The lambs would be roasted, and the families would take the cooked meat home and eat it for dinner as the Passover meal.

Now think about Jesus. All the events surrounding Jesus' arrest and death took place *at the time of the Passover festival*. In fact, according to the chronology of events offered by the Gospel of John, the death of Jesus occurred *on the afternoon just prior to the beginning of the Passover celebration* – that is, at essentially the *exact same time* when all those Jewish families would be sacrificing their lambs at the temple, for the Passover meal. This is a different chronology than that presented by the other Gospels, where it appears that Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples on the night before he died. John presents it slightly differently, with the result that Jesus himself effectively *becomes* the Passover lamb. Remember how, at the first Passover, the blood of the Passover lambs had literally *saved* the people of Israel? The blood of Jesus performs a similar function: it *saves* people.

That was the second clue – and it was a big one. So is the third, which has to do with another major annual Jewish festival. There is a long set of directions in Leviticus 16, which essentially boil down to this: once a year, on a specific day, called the Day of Atonement (in Hebrew "Yom Kippur"), a special set of sacrifices had to be made. Five animals were needed: one bull, brought by the priest; two rams, one brought by the priest and one brought by the whole people; and two male goats, both brought by the people. No *lamb* was needed – but set that detail aside for the moment. The priest

would sacrifice the bull; that sacrifice would cleanse him and the members of his household from the stain of their sins for the past year. One of the goats would be sacrificed; that would cleanse the temple, and the Holy of Holies (the most sacred room in the temple), and the altar, from all the sins that they came in contact with over the course of the year. A little later, the two rams would be sacrificed, one of which would atone for the sins of the priest and the members of his household, restoring their right relationship with God, and the other would atone for the sins of all the people, restoring their right relationship with God. In between the sacrifice of the first two animals and the sacrifice of the two rams, something would be done with the remaining animal – one of the goats – to cleanse the people from all their sins for the past year. But that animal wasn't sacrificed. Instead, the priest would "lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the Israelites, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region, and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness." (Leviticus 16:21-22) That goat was called the *scapegoat*, because it was the "escape goat;" it *escaped* being sacrificed.

Now think about Jesus. What Jesus' death accomplished for us is the *exact same thing* that the sacrifices and the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement accomplished for the Jews. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans: "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed." (Romans 3:23-25) The New Testament specifically uses the word *atonement* to describe what Jesus did in his sacrifice on the cross, the very same word that is used in the Old Testament. Jesus' death on the cross effectively *replaces* the annual Day of Atonement. Jesus effectively becomes the *scapegoat*, bearing *all* the sins of *all* the people, past, present, and future, who place their trust in him. There are just a couple differences: first, the goat was chosen by the people and had *no idea* what it was getting into, whereas Jesus was chosen by *God* and had *full knowledge* of what he was doing. Indeed, he did it *willingly* and *voluntarily*. And second, Jesus is described as a *lamb* rather than a *goat*. Why is that?

Well, because what happens in Jesus is that *both* of these traditions get brought together into *one*. On the one hand, there is the *Passover* tradition, which involves a *sacrificial lamb* whose blood literally *saves* people; on the other, there is the *Atonement* tradition, which involves a *scapegoat* that does not die and who sheds no blood, but who takes away the sins of the people. Jesus replaces *both* of these traditions; his death combines both into one. He is the sacrifice whose blood saves people; he is also the one who bears all the sins of the world. Thus John the Baptist says: "Behold the Lamb of God who *takes away the sins of the world*." In the Old Testament, it wasn't the *lamb* that took away sins, it was the *goat* – but by using the word *lamb* instead of *goat*, John's words link together Passover and Atonement. For Christians, both festivals are *no longer needed*. Jesus takes the place of *both*.

Thus Jesus is *the Lamb of God*. In Latin, the phrase is *Agnus Dei*. By the end of the seventh century, a prayer was being included in the rite of communion that invoked Jesus as *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God. That prayer has often been set to music – by Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, and *many* other composers – and it is still included in the communion liturgy today in Catholic, Anglican, and some Lutheran churches. It's a good prayer for *any* Christian church, anytime: "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace." Amen.

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