

“The Lamb of God”

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John 1:29-42

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The New Testament gives Jesus a *lot* of different titles. Christ, of course, which is equivalent to Messiah. The Son of God. The Son of Man. The Good Shepherd. The Light of the World. The Alpha and the Omega. And so on. Today we are going to hone in on one of them: “The Lamb of God.”

The phrase “the Lamb of God” appears only two times in the entire Bible. Both instances are in today’s Gospel passage. Both times, they are words spoken by John the Baptist, as he beholds Jesus early in his ministry: “He saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” Then, a few verses later: “As he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’” That’s it. The phrase is not found anywhere else. So what does it mean? What did John mean, when he said it? What did John’s disciples understand, when they heard it? It must have meant *something*, because, as John tells the story, it was enough to motivate two of John’s disciples – including Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother – to stop following John and follow Jesus instead.

There are three passages in the Old Testament that give us some clues as to what the phrase “Lamb of God” might mean. The first clue is in the book of Genesis, chapter 22, in the story of the binding of Isaac. This is the familiar story in which God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. At the very last moment, just when Abraham is about to make the killing strike, God intervenes and tells Abraham not to do it after all. In the midst of that story is a curious 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) Abraham binds Isaac atop the altar, and just 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 provided ... a ram?!? Not a lamb. A ram is not the same thing as a lamb. Not in English, nor in the original Hebrew. They are both sheep, but a lamb is a young, baby sheep, while a ram is an adult male sheep. God did not provide a lamb. God provided a ram instead. That worked out just fine for Abraham and Isaac – “Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son” – but keep in mind what Abraham said earlier: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering.” By the end of this story, God has *not yet* provided a lamb for a burnt offering. We’ll come back to that later...!

The second clue 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 disasters. One final disaster is coming, more terrible than all the rest, that will affect every household across the entire land of Egypt, except houses that are 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 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.... 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.... 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 stay safe, each Israelite household must sacrifice a lamb. They paint the lamb’s blood on their doorposts. That blood is the sign that saves them from destruction. The lamb’s blood *saves* the people of God.

Passover became an annual celebration for the people of Israel, a great festival, commemorating their escape from Egypt. Jewish families would travel to Jerusalem, and each household would offer its own Passover sacrifice. On a certain day each spring, they would bring a lamb to the temple, where it would be slaughtered, in the afternoon, before sundown, when Passover would begin. The lambs would be roasted, and the families would take the meat home and eat it for dinner. It was the Passover meal.

Now let’s think about the death of Jesus. Specifically, the *timing* of Jesus’s death. All four Gospels say Jesus’s death took place at the time of the Passover festival. According to the chronology 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 the exact same time* when all those Jewish families would be bringing their lambs to the temple to be sacrificed, for the Passover meal. This is a different chronology than what is presented in the other Gospels, where it appears that the Passover meal occurred the night *before* he died. In John, the Passover meal occurred immediately *after* the death of Jesus. That has theological implications: John is effectively saying that Jesus was a *Passover lamb*. Think back again to the very first Passover, when the Israelites were still in Egypt. The blood of the Passover lambs literally *saved* the people of Israel that night. The blood of Jesus performs a similar function: it *saves* people.

That was the second clue – and it was a big one. Let’s turn to the third clue, which we can find in a long set of directions in the sixteenth chapter in the book of Leviticus. Essentially, those directions boil down to this: once a year, on a specific day, which was called the Day of Atonement (in Hebrew, “Yom Kippur”), a special set of sacrifices had to be made at the temple in Jerusalem. These sacrifices would accomplish two things: first, they would cleanse the high priest, the people, and the temple from the stain of all the sins that had been incurred over the course of the past year; and second, they would restore the high priest and the people to a right relationship with God. Five animals were needed: one bull, two rams, and two male goats. A lamb was *not* needed – but set that detail aside for the moment. First, the high priest would sacrifice the bull. That sacrifice would cleanse him and the members of his household from the stain of their sins. Then, one of the goats would be sacrificed; that would cleanse the temple from all the sins it had been tainted with over the year, in the course of conducting all the other sacrifices. A little while later, the two rams would be sacrificed. The sacrifice of one of those rams would restore the high priest’s right relationship with God. The sacrifice of the other would restore the people’s right relationship with God. One final thing needed to be accomplished: the people needed to

be cleansed from the stain of all their sins. To do that, something would be done with the remaining animal – one of the goats – right in the middle of the four sacrifices. But that goat wasn't sacrificed. Instead, the high 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* from being sacrificed. It was sent away, bearing the sins of the people, into the wilderness. That animal *lived*.

Now think again about Jesus. Jesus's death accomplished for us almost *exactly the same thing* that the sacrifices and the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement accomplished for the Jewish people. The death of Jesus cleansed us from the stain of all our sins – not just for *one* year, but for the *whole course* of our lives. And the death of Jesus restored our right relationship with God. The apostle Paul, in his masterful letter to the Christians in Rome, said that God "put forward" Jesus "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) Jesus *atoned* for our sins, accomplishing *the very same thing* that the sacrifices and the scapegoat did for the Jewish people on the Day of Atonement. So the death of Jesus becomes for us Christians what the Day of Atonement was for the Jews, with the biggest difference being that the Jews had to keep performing those special sacrifices year after year, while the death of Jesus was a once-for-all sacrifice that *never* needs to be repeated. On the cross, Jesus bore the sins of all people – past, present, and future – who place their trust in him. Jesus effectively became the *scapegoat*. But the goat had no idea what it was getting into, whereas Jesus had full knowledge of what he was doing. Indeed, he did it willingly and voluntarily. The goat went away into the wilderness, and *lived* – while Jesus went away to the kingdom of God, and *lives*.

That leaves just one important question. Why is Jesus called *lamb* rather than a *goat*? Why is he the "Lamb of God" instead of the "Goat of God"? Well, because what happens in Jesus is that both of these annual Jewish festivals get brought together into one. On the one hand, there is Passover, which involves a sacrificial lamb whose blood literally saves people; on the other hand, there is the Day of Atonement, which involves a scapegoat that does not die and sheds no blood, but that takes away the sins of the people. Jesus stands in for *both* of these festivals; his death combines the two into one. He is the Passover Lamb, the sacrifice whose blood literally *saves* people. He is also the scapegoat, the one who bears the sins of all the people and carries them away. In the Gospel story, John the Baptist recognizes this truth, that Jesus is the Passover Lamb (he saves us!) and that Jesus is also the one who takes away the burden of all our sins (he atones for us!). John rolls it all into one when he says: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." John's words link together those two Jewish festivals, Passover and Atonement. For Christians, neither festival is needed any longer. The sacrifice of Jesus takes the place of both. Because he *is* the *Lamb of God* who *takes away the sin of the world*.

So it turns out that Abraham was right when he said: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering." *Jesus* was the Lamb that God provided, for *all* of us. Thanks be to God! *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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