

Jesus, Lamb of God

We spent most of the fall, from early September to early December, looking at Jesus and His interactions with various people in a variety of situations. We saw Him dealing with the temptations that Satan threw at Him and later dealing with Satan's works: blindness, disease, demonic oppression and the like. We saw Jesus dealing with those who believed in Him and those who didn't. We saw Him ministering to the outcasts of His society, those who had been rejected by the good folks. The focus of last fall was Jesus in relationship to different people, to learn how He responded in a variety of settings.

Starting today I would like to look at the names Jesus used of Himself or that others, like John the Baptist, used of Him. And we'll begin with John, because He announced the beginning of Jesus' public ministry with an unusual title -- let's look at John 1:29:

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

What do you think of when you hear the word "lamb"? You may think of a cute, woolly little animal that bleats and that Jesus carried around on His shoulders, because that's in the Sunday School lessons. What's important here is to think about what the people who heard John say this would have thought he meant. In their minds the primary purpose of the Lamb of God would be as a sacrifice. Anytime you would hear the words "lamb" and "God" in the same sentence you would think of a sacrificial lamb. Why?

If you dig back into the Old Testament you see that the penalty for defying God's laws was death, but that the death wouldn't have to be that of the person who sinned, but could be paid for by the sacrifice of a lamb, sometimes of a goat or of two doves or pigeons for those who could not afford a lamb or a goat.

Here's an example from Leviticus 6:

Yahweh said to Moses: "If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the LORD by deceiving his neighbor about something entrusted to him or left in his care or stolen, or if he cheats him, or if he finds lost property and lies about it, or if he swears falsely, or if he commits any such sin that people may do -- when he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found, or whatever it was that he swore falsely about. He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner on the day he presents his guilt offering. And as a penalty he must bring to the priest, that is, to Yahweh, his guilt offering, a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way the priest will make atonement for him before the LORD, and he will be forgiven for any of these things he did that made him guilty."

There are a number of important things to notice in this law. For one, notice when the restoration is supposed to take place -- not when the person is caught, but when the

act is committed: “When he thus sins and becomes guilty he must return (the property).” Guilt comes with the wrongful act itself and should be dealt with by the person who has done the wrong. Notice also that the restitution is more than giving back what you took, that you add 20% of the value as a penalty for doing the wrong in the first place. This acts as a real deterrent and acknowledges that when someone steals from you, you lose more than just the object stolen -- there is an emotional cost, the sense of feeling violated, that this repayment helps to cover. The third thing I’d like to draw to your attention is that the restitution to the person wronged is accompanied by the offering of a sacrifice to God. “He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner on the day he presents his guilt offering.” The sacrifice, in this case a bull, but in other examples a lamb or a goat, is given to the priest who kills the animal, spills its blood on the altar and pours out the remaining blood at the base of the altar, then cooks the meat that remains. The blood that is poured out is considered the life of the animal -- let me read from later in Leviticus:

The life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life. (17:11)

The picture is now clear. The penalty for sin is death -- and we know the familiar verse from Paul’s writings in Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God’s gift to His people during the time of the Old Covenant, was the blood of an animal, the life of an animal, that would become a substitute for a person’s own life. “The life of a creature is in the blood and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar.” In other words, people deserved to die for the wrong things they did, but God gave them a way of escape. Lives were atoned for on the altar and guilt was removed through the sacrifice of a lamb or a bull.

All that is background to this phrase by which John the Baptist introduced Jesus to the crowds around him at the Jordan River: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Do you see how people would have heard that phrase in the light of their understanding of what a lamb was used for and how it took away a person’s sin?

But there’s something bigger in what John has to say about Jesus -- He takes away the sin of ... the whole world. In Jewish thinking, each sin required a separate sacrifice in order to deal with the guilt of that sin, but here John is saying that Jesus is the one Lamb who can take away all sin. This is a radically new thing that John is saying and he’s saying it years before Jesus would actually be sacrificed on the cross of Calvary. A few verses later, when John says to two of his disciples, “Look, the Lamb of God!”, they leave him and start to follow Jesus. (v. 36)

In the New Testament, the word “lamb” is used once in Paul’s first letter to Corinth and once in 1 Peter in reference to Jesus’ sacrifice for sin and then 30 times in one other book of the New Testament. Quiz question: does anyone know which book

refers to Jesus as the “Lamb” 30 times? The book of Revelation, which is a short version of the first phrase in this work: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ”, or the “revealing of Jesus the Messiah”. This is a book that allows us to see the destiny of the Lamb of God and we will look at it in some detail in a minute.

First, the two references from the epistles:

Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

This is a bit tricky and requires the whole context in order to make sense of it, but the heart of what Paul is saying here is that because Jesus is our Passover Lamb, we should purify ourselves from any sin that has obviously and defiantly been preserved within the church. Leaven or yeast is a biblical symbol for sin and so Paul rejects the yeast of malice and wickedness which had infected the whole church in Corinth and was asking them to participate in the life of the body of Christ in sincerity and in truth. The Corinthian church was not only allowing blatant sin, but was proud of it, defiant, unrepentant. And Paul tells them that they need to get rid of that old yeast -- distance themselves from the guilty one -- and celebrate Christ's gift in sincerity and in truth.

The second reference from 1 Peter 1:19 is also a call to holiness, to Christ-likeness in our life choices:

Remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favorites when He judges. He will judge or reward you according to what you do. So you must live in reverent fear of Him during your time as foreigners here on earth. For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And the ransom He paid was not mere gold or silver. He paid for you with the precious lifeblood of Christ, the sinless, spotless, Lamb of God.

The cost of the sacrifice that redeemed us is so great, the life blood of God's own Son, that Peter says it should motivate us to reject the empty life we had before we knew Him and give ourselves fully to a life of obedience, of what he calls “reverent fear” of God.

Now we turn to the Revelation of Jesus Christ . . . the final book of the Bible and it all starts in chapter 5. John sees a scroll in the right hand of Him who sits on the throne and an angel calls out for someone who is worthy to break the seals and unroll the scroll, but no one could be found and John, so taken up in this scene in heaven begins to weep.

But one of the 24 elders said to me, “Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has conquered. He is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals.

And so John turns to look at this Lion of the tribe of Judah:

I looked and I saw a Lamb that had been killed but was now standing between the throne and the four living beings and among the twenty-four elders. He had

seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God that are sent out into every part of the earth. He stepped forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the One sitting on the throne. And as He took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty four elders fell down before the Lamb.

And the worship that begins with this moment must have been breathtaking. The four living beings and the 24 elders begin to sing a new song about the worthiness of God's Lamb:

For You were killed, and Your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Then John hears the sound of singing -- not like any choir on earth ever sang, but thousands and millions of angels sing in a huge circle around the throne of God:

*The Lamb is worthy -- the Lamb who was killed
He is worthy to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor
and glory and blessing.*

As if that wasn't thrilling enough, then John heard every creature in heaven and earth and under the earth and in the sea singing:

*Blessing and honor and glory and power
Belong to the One sitting on the throne and to the Lamb, forever and ever.*

This scene is the fulfilment of Paul's prophecy in Philippians 2 that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father. This is the destiny of God's Lamb, the reward for His suffering. He will receive the praise of the nations and of all the hosts of heaven -- His humble obedience has made Him worthy of all praise and adoration.

Again, in chapter 7, we see the praise of all nations going to the Lamb and then John finds out about the people who are offering their praise. One of the elders tells him that they are the ones coming out of the great tribulation, having washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. He ends his explanation with these words to John:

The Lamb who stands in front of the throne will be their Shepherd. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water.

The lamb becomes the shepherd of the sheep. The lamb who was sacrificed and who now lives will lead the sheep He died for to springs of life-giving water. It's a fascinating picture.

In chapter 14 we see the Lamb as the object of worship and obedience for the 144,000 and in chapter 17 we read about a rebellion against the Lamb that He, Jesus, defeats because, "He is Lord over all lords and King over all kings."

But there is a new perspective on the Lamb coming in Revelation 19, and that is the picture of the bridegroom, ready for His wedding.

Then I heard again what sounded like the shout of a huge crowd, or the roar of mighty ocean waves, or the crash of loud thunder. "Hallelujah! For the Lord

our God the Almighty, reigns. Let us be glad and rejoice and honor Him. For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb and His bride has prepared herself . . . And the angel said, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb."

Finally, at the end of chapter 21 and beginning of chapter 22 we are offered a dazzling picture of heaven.

No temple could be seen in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light.

Evil will not be allowed to enter the holy city and there will be no idolatry or dishonesty there. A river will flow from the throne of God and of the Lamb and the tree of life will grow on its banks. And then the final mention of the Lamb in 22:3:

No longer will anything be cursed. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and His servants will worship Him. And they will see His face, and His Name will be written on their foreheads. (vv.3,4)

Stepping back to the day when John the Baptist told the world that Jesus was God's Lamb and that He would take away the sins of the world, we can now see this in some perspective. God sent His Son into the world to be the sin-bearer for all people. The prophets knew that this day would come and prepared God's people for it, but it didn't come in the package they expected. God's presence had been seen before in great acts of power, in fire and a cloud, in the passion of the prophetic word -- but now His presence could be known through the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God came in meekness, in humility, and with a heart to sacrifice Himself, to pay the price for human rebellion and to win for Himself the hearts of people who would appreciate what that sacrifice cost and would respond to it with love and thanksgiving.

When God encounters humility, throughout Scripture, He responds to it with grace and with blessing. It is obvious that He values humility as perhaps the greatest virtue that human beings are capable of. And He demonstrates how highly He values humility by coming to earth in the most humble of ways, as a child whose whole purpose would be to live and then to die, for the sake of others.

In Revelation we see how God honors this humility and this sacrifice. The people of the nations gather around a throne and see there a Lamb that had been killed, a sacrificial lamb whose blood had been poured out so that sin could be forgiven. But this Lamb now lives and receives the honor and tributes of people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. Who would have thought that this would be Jesus' destiny when He was born in Bethlehem, when He toiled as a carpenter in Nazareth or when He was whipped and crucified after 3 years of ministry?

There's a story told of an old recluse who lived far away from most people in the mountains of Colorado. When he died, distant relatives who hadn't seen him for years came from the city to collect his valuables. They didn't find much; an old shack

with an outhouse beside it, an old cooking pot and some mining equipment, a cracked table and a three-legged chair, a kerosene lamp and a dilapidated cot. They left without much and as they drove away the old man's one friend in the mountains flagged them down and asked if he could have what they'd left behind. "Go right ahead", they replied and drove off down the mountain. The friend walked into the cabin, lifted one of the floor boards and picked up all the gold his friend had discovered over his 53 years of living there, enough to build a palace. And he pondered what might have happened if the old man's relatives had actually had an interest in him, and had spent the time to get to know him.

Our goal for this coming year is the same as every other year -- to get to know Jesus better and better, to discover more and more of the riches of His grace, to walk close to Him in the posture of a learner, a disciple. Just as Jesus has received glory and honor, so there are great rewards for those who walk with Him, who learn to trust Him and who place a great value on knowing the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.