

Sermon Series: *The Gospel of John*

The Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sin of the World

John 1:29-34 (ESV)

Text Reader: **Herb Wiebe**

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! **30** This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ **31** I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” **32** And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. **33** I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ **34** And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

Introduction

In this passage, John the Baptist says about Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” How does he arrive at the conclusion that Jesus is the Lamb of God? What does that mean? What did it mean to those who originally heard those words? What should those words mean to us? Should the meaning be different? Or is it the same.

John 1:29-30 (ESV)

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! **30** This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’

John tells us that this scene took place on the “next day” (v.29). That refers to the day following the interview of John by the priests and the Levites, which we looked at [last week](#). They came asking, “Who are you?” And John said, “I am not the Christ, but that the Christ had already arrived and is among you. I am just a voice who is preparing the way for the Christ to be revealed.” Essentially what he said was, “Stop looking at me and start looking for someone infinitely more important than me. Turn and look at Him.”

Who Is the Lamb of God?

Then **the next day**, John sees Jesus walking toward him and he says to those around him, “**Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**” John sees Jesus and publicly identifies Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is the testimony of John. This is what John the Baptist was publicly teaching about Jesus. This is what he wants us to believe about Jesus.

John really goes out on a limb here doesn’t he? John has quite a ministry going on. Crowds of people are showing up to hear him preach. He has built up quite a fan club. He exerts significant influence. He even has his own disciples. He is now making a public prediction about this presently unknown guy named Jesus.

At this Point Jesus Was Unknown

At this point, no one has heard of Jesus. He's just a guy in the crowd. He is one man among many who are listening to John. There is presently nothing notable about Jesus. He has performed no miracle. He has preached no sermon. He has so far done nothing to draw attention to Himself in any way. And yet John cracks the sky with this shocking statement, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*"

What has led him to such a conclusion? What has caused him to say this? As John is speaking can't you see him waving his hand in the air and pointing to Jesus. And all eyes that had been on John, suddenly turn to see him about whom John was speaking. As the heads turn, John keeps talking,

John 1:30 (ESV)

"This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'"

He Who Comes After Me Was Before Me

We have read this before. This is now the third time John has said something like this (1:15, 27, 29). When the biblical writers want to emphasize something they simply repeat it. As you are reading the Bible, pay close attention to whatever is repeated.

The fact that there is one who comes *after* John who is far superior to John is a thrice emphasized point and we must not miss this. John the Baptist evidently said this more than once and John the Evangelist (i.e. the author of this gospel) has now referred to it three times in the first three paragraphs of his letter. This is not a small point in the mind of both Johns.

The reason this is so significant is because the timing of his arrival on the stage of the world does not fully reveal who He truly is. There is more to Jesus than meets the eye. If we simply look at Him with physical eyes, Jesus just looks like a guy who showed up and started a new ministry some time after John started his ministry. And then we discover that Jesus was John's cousin and was born six months after John. So he came after John into the world and he came after John into a public preaching ministry. Is that it? No! There is much more than that—so much more.

Yes, that's how it happened on the earthly time line, but John shouts for us to see that there is so much more to him than that! John is saying, "He may have been born a few months after me and he may have come after me in public ministry but **he was before me!** He existed long before I was even born. His body was born in Bethlehem but His soul long existed as the eternal Word of God. He is man, but He also is God. **"He came after me, but He ranks before me, because He existed long before me."** Jesus is so much more important than John, because of who He truly is.

Why Call Him the Lamb of God?

We have to wonder why John refers to Jesus as the '*Lamb of God*?' This title is unique to John. He is the only gospel writer who refers to Jesus in this way. John refers to Jesus as "the Lamb of God"¹ only twice in this gospel, here, in verse 29, and in verse 36. And in the Revelation of John, he refers to Jesus simply as "the Lamb" 28 times in 26 verses. Evidently John the Evangelist picked this phrase up from John the Baptist. Why does he refer to Jesus like this? Is this a prophetic foreshadowing?

¹ The word here translated 'lamb' (*amnos* ἄμνος) is not the usual word for lamb (*arnion*). Other than these two verses in this chapter, the word only appears three other times in the Bible; Is 53:7; Acts 8:32 (which is citing Is 53:7), and 1 Peter 1:19.

Does John already have some sense that Jesus would die? Or does he (like Caiaphas and Pilate) speak of Jesus better than he knows?



The imagery of a lamb is not a very inspiring one, is it? If you wanted to inspire courage and devotion among followers you could probably come up with a more dramatic image. No one chooses a lamb as the team mascot. More aggressive and fearsome animals can be chosen. My high school mascot was the eagle. An eagle is a fierce looking bird. We can root for the Boston Bruins, but the Boston Lambs? The Boston Bruins won the world cup, not the Boston Lambs.

If you want to strike fear into the heart of your enemies, John probably should have said something like, “Behold, the **ram** of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Now there is an image of power. The image of a ram has punch to it. We instantly envision two rams smashing into each other, locking horns with immense force. That’s awe inspiring. But a lamb? No one drives a Dodge Lamb, but thousands and thousands of people will drive a Dodge Ram!

What would this title, the Lamb of God, have brought to mind in those who heard John say this?

Sacrificial System

The original hearers may have thought about the sacrificial system. The book of Leviticus² taught that a lamb without blemish was to be used as a sin offering. It was understood that the blood of a lamb did not *actually* take away sin, but served as a temporary covering and a pointer to the “**One who was to come**” who *would* indeed take away sin (Heb 10:4, 11-14) forever.

Passover

They may have thought about Passover. A lamb without blemish was central to Passover (Ex 12:5). It was the blood of a lamb without blemish that caused the death-angel to passover the people of Israel that night thus sparing their lives.

Abraham & Isaac

They may have thought about the story of Abraham and Isaac. This story contains the first mention in Scripture of a lamb being used as an offering to God. As father and son approached the mountain Isaac asked,

Genesis 22:7-8 (ESV)

7 “My father!” And he said, “Here am I, my son.” He said, “Behold, we have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” 8 Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

And God did provided for Himself a sacrifice and so Isaac’s life was spared.

The Day of Atonement

They also may have thought of the most holy day of the year—the Day of Atonement. This was the one day of the year that the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies (Lev 16).

² Lev 4:32, 35; 5:6-7; 9:3; 12:6; 14:13.

(Symbolically it was the one day of the year in which the people were nearest to God.) However, before the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, he had to choose two goats.

One goat would be sacrificed and it was his blood that would allow the high priest access into the Holy of Holies. The other goat would have all the sins of Israel confessed over his head (yes, the list would have been long) and then he would be released into the wilderness symbolically **removing the sin of Israel by taking it away into the wilderness**. Even though a goat was used and not a lamb, still the idea of having sin taken away would most likely have been brought to their minds.

The verb ἀῖρω (*airō*, take away) has the sense of “bearing off,” “getting rid of,” or “carrying away,” in association with the Hebrew *kpr*, which suggests the idea of sins being “wiped away.”³

Jews today continue this celebration and it is called Yom Kippur, “the Day of Atonement,” or “the Day of sins wiped away.”

He Takes Away the Sin of the World

Aspects of all four of these ideas may have come to mind. However, one thing John said probably would not have come to mind and would have been jarring. John said that Jesus was, “*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” He did not say, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of Israel.” This statement would have caught the attention of the original hearers and it should catch ours as well.

Many of the Jews mistakenly thought that the Christ came only to save Israel. However, John clarifies here that this is not the case. Indeed Christ does come to save Israel, but He did not come to save only Israel. Certainly the Christ will take away the sin of Israel, but His atoning work will not be limited to Israel.

Messiah’s saving work will be for all the people of the world, but not all people without qualification. The Bible does not teach universalism—that all people without qualification are saved. John the Evangelist has already explained to us in the Prologue (Jn 1:11-12) how this saving work of Christ is applied. “*But to all who did receive him, who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God*” (Jn 1:12). Christ’s atoning work will be effective only for those who receive Jesus by exercising faith in His name no matter what tribe or people they are from.

All of ethnic Israel will not be automatically *included* (in Messiah’s saving, atoning work) just because they were born into a Jewish family. Only those of Israel who put their faith in Jesus will be saved. Conversely all the people of the world will not be automatically *excluded* just because they were not born into a Jewish family. All people of the world who put their faith in the name of Jesus will be saved by Jesus. ***Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.***

The Samaritans were the first to grasp this truth. After spending two days with Jesus the Samaritans concluded,

“... we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” (Jn 4:42)

³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 67.

He Takes Away Sin

John also says that Jesus takes away the “sin” (singular) of the world, not “sins” (plural) of the world. Leon Morris writes, “‘Sin’ is in the singular, referring to the totality of the world’s sin rather than to a number of individual acts.”⁴ All of the individual acts of all the people of the world are here spoken of as a single collective.

There is only one thing that separates man from God and that is sin. And there is only one Lamb who can take away sin and His name is Jesus. He is the Lamb “of God.” He is God’s Lamb. Jesus is the lamb that God Himself has provided (just as Abraham had said He would). Jesus is the unique Lamb, especially chosen by God. He is the one-and-only Lamb specifically selected by God to fulfill God’s great plan to redeem humanity by taking away sin. ***Sin is the universal problem of all people of the world and Jesus is the universal savior of all people of the world, that is of all those who receive Jesus by believing in His name.***

How does John know Jesus is **that** Lamb? How can he so confidently assert such an audacious claim? John answers these questions in verses 31-33.

John 1:31-33 (ESV)

31 *I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.* **32** *And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’*

Christ Revealed Through John’s Baptism

One of the purposes⁵ of John the Baptist’s ministry was to reveal the Christ (i.e. messiah = “the anointed one”) to the nation of Israel. God had decided to reveal His chosen Messiah through His being baptized by John. There are many ways that God could have revealed Messiah, but He decided to reveal Him through John’s baptism.

John Did Not Know Jesus Was Messiah

John did not know who Messiah was. He knew Messiah was coming but he did not know exactly who He was. John did not know that Jesus was Messiah even though Jesus and John were related (Lk 1:36). They had known each other growing up but nothing about Jesus had ever before caused John to believe that Jesus was God’s chosen Messiah.

So how did John learn that Jesus was the Messiah? How did John know that Jesus was the “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?” The answer is that God told what to look for. Look at verse 33.

John 1:33 (ESV)

33 *I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Another purpose of John’s ministry was to preach a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins (Mk 1:4).

John says, “He who sent me to baptize with water said to me...” Who sent John to baptize with water? We find the answer back in **1:6**.

John 1:6 (ESV)

6 “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.”

God sent John to baptize with water. And God also told John specifically how to identify who Messiah would be. Messiah would be the man “**on whom he saw the Spirit descend and remain.**” God revealed to John exactly how to know who it was that God had designated as Messiah. God gave John a sign. God told John how to pick Messiah out of the crowd. When you meet someone for the first time in a crowd you need some distinctive identifier, like she’ll be wearing a red hat. Well, God told John “Messiah will be wearing My Holy Spirit.”

Jesus Had Already Been Baptized

So on this day, which is the second day that John is describing, John saw Jesus walking toward him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The reason he said this was because of the events that had taken place when John had previously baptized Jesus. It is interesting that John does not specifically tell us about Jesus’ baptism. We have to look to the other three gospels for this (Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:12-13; Lk 3:21-22). But John assumes we know that he did baptize Jesus because he tells us what he witnessed. John says,

John 1:32 (ESV)

32 “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.”

The Spirit Like A Dove

All of the gospel writers mention the Holy Spirit coming down like a dove upon Jesus. The dove is a symbol of purity and innocence. Remember Jesus told his disciples to be “as wise as serpents but as innocent as doves” (Mt 10:16). The dove symbolizes Jesus’ sinlessness, purity, and innocence. A dove will only remain where it feels at home. The Holy Spirit was at home resting upon Jesus because Jesus was holy. He was a fitting place for the Spirit to remain.

1 John 3:5 (ESV)

5 You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.

1 Peter 2:22 (ESV)

22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

2 Cor 5:21 (ESV)

21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Heb 4:15 (ESV)

15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who is in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Jesus could be the perfect sacrificial lamb because He is the only man who ever lived who had no sin. He is a lamb without blemish.

The Spirit Remained On Him

John is the only gospel writer who notes that the Spirit **remained** on Him. This points to the fact that something new and wonderful was happening. In the Old Testament the Spirit came upon certain people, only for a certain amount of time to enable them for certain tasks.⁶ However, it had been prophesied that Messiah would usher in a new age of the Spirit under the New Covenant which would remove the limitations of the Spirit under the Old Covenant.

Joel 2:28-29 (ESV)

28 *“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. 29 Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.*

Isaiah 44:3 (ESV)

3 *For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.*

While John does not tell us about Jesus’ baptism with water, he does tell us about the Spirit *remaining* on him. Obviously John wants to make a point—the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus was a far more important event than Jesus’ descent into waters of baptism. And the ministry of Jesus who baptizes with the Holy Spirit will be far superior to the ministry of John who only baptized with water (Mt 2:11).

“Baptizing with the Spirit and baptizing with water is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug. It’s the difference between a person and a painting, between a marriage and a ring, between a birth and a birth certificate, between immersion in water and immersion in God.”⁷

The abiding presence of the Spirit is important because of the connection with the coming of Messiah. “In contemporary Jewish belief the Messiah was to be the bearer of God’s Spirit.”⁸ God may have directly told John how to identify Messiah, but He had already said it through the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 11:1-2 (ESV)

1 *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. 2 And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him...*

Isaiah 42:1 (ESV)

1 *Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

Isaiah 61:1-2 (ESV)

1 *The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives,*

⁶ Num. 11:25; Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 14:19; 1 Sam. 11:6; 16:13; 2 Chron. 15:1; 20:14.

⁷ John Piper in the sermon “This Is He Who Baptizes With the Holy Spirit” available at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/this-is-he-who-baptizes-with-the-holy-spirit>.

⁸ Colin G. Kruse, *John: The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 4, Gen. ed. Leon Morris. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 82.

and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,

These verses are the very words that Jesus read in the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth and then stunned the congregation by claiming that He was the fulfillment of this prophecy (Lk 4:16-21). This became part of the foundational doctrine of the early church. The abiding presence of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, uniquely identified Jesus as the One-and-Only Son singled out by God the Father as the chosen one, the Messiah who was coming into the world. When Peter went to the Gentile Cornelius he told them, “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38).

Jesus Baptizes with the Holy Spirit

What this means for us is that there is no other place to receive the Spirit of God than from Jesus. **Jesus alone baptizes with the Holy Spirit.** Jesus is the source of spiritual life. Jesus alone submerses you into the life of God. Only Jesus plunges your soul into God’s river of life.

Revelation 22:1 (ESV)

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

When the Lamb of God takes away your sin, He also baptizes you with the Holy Spirit. If you are lifeless and limp, then come to Jesus and He will give you His life-giving, Holy Spirit. If you are dead to God, then the only way to become alive to God is by going to Jesus and having Him baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

This happens when you by faith cry out to Jesus to give you life. Receiving the Holy Spirit, or another way of saying it is to be baptized with the Holy Spirit, is what it means to be born again. Being born of God (i.e. being born again) happens by the work of the Holy Spirit as you exercise your faith in Jesus.

Jesus also fills His disciples with the Holy Spirit. If you are a believer and have already received the Holy Spirit, then perhaps today you need the Lord to fill you with the life and power of His Spirit. If you find yourself weak and spiritually weak, then why not ask the Lord right now to fill you with a renewed fullness of His Spirit.

This Is the Son of God

John 1:34 (ESV)

34 And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

John has offered us his testimony for why He is convinced that Jesus is the one-and-only Lamb of God and the one-and-only Son of God; He existed before John, John publicly proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, John witnessed the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus and remain, God personally told John to be watching for this and it was a confirmation of what the older prophets had already predicted, Jesus is the only person who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

The purpose of John’s ministry was to point people to Jesus. This is one of the purposes of this church. Is that one of the purposes of your life? God is not hiding Himself from us. He has given us signs to identify His Son. Do you believe the signs? John didn’t know Jesus was the Messiah until God revealed Him to John. If you find yourself in the same place, then ask the Lord to reveal Jesus to you too.