

The Lamb of God
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What do people look for in Jesus Christ?

⁵ And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

What do people look for in the person of Jesus Christ? Some see Jesus as a great moral teacher – a Socrates who ‘got religion.’ Others see Jesus as an outstanding leader: a first century George S. Patton. Many are impressed with his example of sacrifice and service. There are those who emphasize Jesus the philosopher; while others see him as a social reformer. The hymn ‘In the Garden’ emphasizes the tenderheartedness of Jesus: Jesus the abiding friend. On the other end of the musical spectrum is ‘Onward Christian Soldiers:’ Jesus Christ the warrior king leading his troops into battle. I remember my dad telling me of a book that described Jesus as the greatest salesman the world had ever known. In Terrance McNally’s play, “Corpus Christi,” Jesus is portrayed as a homosexual. Liberation theologians perceive Jesus to be a revolutionary. In the 60’s many saw him as the original hippie. In the musical ‘Jesus Christ, Superstar’ he is a rock and roll singer, whereas in the musical ‘Godspell’ he is a clown. In Nicholas Kazantzakis’ novel ‘The Last Temptation of Christ’ Jesus is portrayed, rather improbably I think, as a Buddhist. I could go on, but I believe you get the point: there is a great variety of opinion out there concerning the work and person of Jesus Christ: some it is insightful, some is provocative, some is silly, some is blasphemous and some is true while some is false.

Enabling us to sort through all the competing images of Jesus Christ is our central affirmation that the definitive portrait of the person and work of the Lord is revealed to us in the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They are the last word on the subject. Art and scholarship have their place and the Lord Jesus Christ will continue to inspire scholars, painters, poets, movie makers, musicians and more. But, whatever they may say, write or do, we must always be ready and willing to return to the source, to get back to the beginning, and study again what the gospel writers have to tell us about our Lord.

Until this point in the gospel John has been writing skyscraper theology. Consider the opening verses: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with

God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. John frames the story he is about to tell in the eternal purpose and wisdom of the Word of God. In vs. 29 – 34, John brings the story down to earth: he introduces us, for the first time, to the person of Jesus of Nazareth himself, and to Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Jesus, of course, is the focus of the gospel story. For this reason, it is very significant to note how Jesus is first introduced to us in the gospel. When he enters the scene, what is the first thing we are told regarding him?

In John's Gospel, Jesus Christ is presented first as the Lamb of God

²⁹ The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John baptized using the waters of the Jordan River. He was not conveniently located. He was in the wilderness, not far from the Dead Sea. Nonetheless, significant numbers of people sought John out, to hear him preach, repent of their sins and be baptized. Because the spread of his fame, a delegation of religious leaders were sent from Jerusalem to question John: the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" The day after the delegation's visit, John sees Jesus coming towards him. He points to Jesus and declares "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!": Thus, in John's gospel, the first thing we are told about Jesus of Nazareth is that he is '*the* Lamb of God.' The first image of Jesus of Nazareth that we are given is not that of a king on a throne, or a conquering warrior in the saddle, or a teacher before his students, but that of a lamb placed upon the altar of sacrifice.

The figure of the lamb is one of the deepest, richest and most meaningful images in the Bible. The Lamb of God is present at the beginning of the story the Bible tells and he is present at its culmination. It suggests Christ's gentleness and his moral perfection. The heart of Hebrew worship was the blood sacrifice. The lamb is an image supreme, of sacrifice and substitution. It speaks to humanity's greatest need. Every day lambs were sacrificed at the Temple to express devotion, to cover sin, and to expiate guilt. When John declares that Jesus of Nazareth is the Lamb of God, he is saying that the sacrificial system of the ancient Temple points to Christ. All of the lambs sacrificed point to the coming true and final sacrifice.

In order to understand the fullness of what John meant, to see how this is so, we need to take a brief overview of Biblical history. We will trace the role of the Lamb of God in the unfolding story the Bible tells. When our survey is complete we will see with greater clarity the significance of John's words that day by the Jordan River.

The Lamb of God in Biblical History

Genesis 4 – The Lamb is the Sacrifice God will accept

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with

favor on Abel and his offering,⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

The first appearance of a sacrificial lamb is in the fourth chapter of the Bible. Genesis three tells the story of the Temptation and Fall. As a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience sin enters the world and Adam and Eve are driven from the Garden of Eden. It is no longer to be presumed that men and women may stand in God's presence. They are driven from the Garden, driven from his presence. The question now is this: on what basis can man return and come before God? How is it that we, sinful humanity, may come into God's presence?

Adam and Eve's two sons, Cain and Abel, bring their tribute offerings to God. A tribute offering is a gift given from an inferior to one who is greater. Bringing their offerings, they acknowledge God's greatness and superiority. They seek to stand before God's presence. Cain brings an offering of grain, fruit and vegetables, the product of the soil. Abel offers a sacrificial lamb. Abel brought a sacrifice. Cain brought an offering. Cain brought a gift that was appropriate to his occupation. Cain presumed that God would be satisfied with his offering. He presumed that he could decide and determine the foundation he would stand upon in appearing before God. However, God approves of Abel's offering and rejects Cain's.

There are two lessons we learn from this story. The first is that we are not free to bring any offering to God. It is not we who determine what will please God. God has established his standard. It is our obligation to give to him the offering he demands.

The second is to note the essentiality of blood sacrifice. The offered lamb is that which is pleasing to God. The chasm that resulted from the Fall, separating mankind from God, will only to be bridged by sacrifice. If we are to come into God's presence then the offering we carry must be a blood sacrifice.

This is the first, and earliest, lesson regarding the Lamb of God that we find in the Bible. A lamb is an offering God will accept. The second lesson is this: the lamb is the sacrifice God himself will provide.

Genesis 22 – The Lamb is the Sacrifice God Himself will Provide

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

⁸ Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”

In the twenty-second chapter of Genesis God tests Abraham, the man whom we call the “father of faith.” The great struggle of Abraham's life had been the fact that he and his wife Sarah were childless. God had given a promise to Abraham that one day he would have a son and that through that son the descendents of Abraham would be as great as the sands on the seashore. Abraham and his wife were already old when the promise was given, but they

believed God and they waited. They waited over twenty-five years until one day, miraculously, in her ninety-ninth year, Sara became pregnant. Isaac was born. The promise was fulfilled.

Then, while Isaac was still a young boy, God tests Abraham, commanding him to go, travel to distant Mt. Moriah and there to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham's only son, whom he loved. Isaac knew the sacrificial drill. As they approach the place of sacrifice, he asks his father, "Where is the sacrificial lamb?" Abraham tells his son that God himself will give the lamb. They arrive at the place of sacrifice and Abraham dutifully prepares for the sacrifice. He binds Isaac and lays him upon the altar. He takes the knife and raises it to heaven. And then, at the last moment, the angel of the Lord calls out to him, stopping the sacrifice and telling Abraham that he had indeed passed the test. And then Abraham looks up and he sees a ram whose horns have been caught in the thicket. God had indeed provided the sacrifice. Abraham takes the ram, kills it, and offers it upon the altar he had prepared for his son.

From the story of Abel we learn that God requires a blood sacrifice. In the story of the testing of Abraham, we learn that God himself will provide the sacrifice that is necessary. It is the Lamb of God who will be sacrificed, not the son of Abraham. It is the Lamb that God provides, not the son that Abraham offers. God requires it. God will also provide it. The next essential teaching regarding the Lamb of God is found in the second book of the Bible, Exodus. Here we learn that the lamb's blood has the power to redeem us from death.

Exodus 12 – The Lamb's blood redeems from death

take a lamb...one for each household...and slaughter them at twilight. ⁷ Then...take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses...
¹² "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

In Exodus, chapter 12, the last of the terrible plagues visited upon the people of Egypt is about to be unleashed. The angel of death is to fly over the households of Egypt. His instructions are to take, to kill, the first born son of each and every home. The only exception is this: on some of the homes, that is, the homes of the Jewish slaves, the angel of death will find the blood of a sacrificial lamb spread upon the sides of the door frame and its mantle. The Jewish households are instructed to keep the Passover. Prior to sundown, they sacrifice a ram, gather its blood and smear it upon the doorposts of their homes. The blood is a sign for death to pass over this home. The blood of the ram redeems from death. The blood of the lamb thwarts the angel of death in his grim purpose. The angel of death is instructed to pass over those homes where blood is found on the door posts. Death has already come to that house and, at least for that evening, it will not come again.

We are looking at the image of the Lamb of God in biblical history. The first thing we note is that a sacrificial lamb is the basis upon we can approach God's presence. It is a sacrifice God will accept. Second, God himself will one day provide the necessary sacrificial lamb. Next, it is the blood of the lamb that redeems from death. Fourthly, the Lamb's blood covers sin.

Leviticus 16 – The Lamb's blood covers sin

¹⁵“Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. ¹⁶Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins.

Leviticus sixteen is one of the more important chapters in the Bible. It describes the solemn spiritual activities of the Day of Atonement. As we have noted previously, what made the ancient Israelites unique was the reality of God dwelling in the midst of his people. God's presence was with the Jews in a unique and special way. God's presence dwelt in the Tabernacle, behind the curtain, in the space known as the Holiest of Holies.

At the same time, God's presence amongst his people created a problem. God himself is holy. God's people, however, are not. The challenge was this: how may a holy God continually dwell in the midst of a sinful people? Sin had to be dealt with in some way. A covering of sin was needed. Covering sin was the spiritual work of the Day of Atonement. Through its solemn ceremonies, the sin of the people of Israel would be covered, atoned, for another year.

The central spiritual activity of the day revolved around two goats. The High Priest would cast lots, designating one goat to become the scapegoat and the other to be the sin offering. The goat that was the sin offering would be killed and its blood collected. The High Priest would then take the blood and enter into the Tabernacle (or Temple) and, on this day alone in the year; he would go behind the veil, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. He would sprinkle some of the blood on the golden Mercy Seat of the ark. In this way, the Bible says, the priest would make 'atonement' – 'at-one-ment' between God and his people.

After offering the sin offering, the High Priest would then go to the scapegoat. He would lay his hands upon the goat and he would pray, confessing the sins of the people of Israel and transferring their sin to the goat, the scapegoat. After he had prayed the goat would be driven out into the wilderness, symbolizing how God takes the sins of those who are forgiven and separates them as far as east is from the west.

We are looking at the image of the Lamb of God in the Biblical story. We learn that God requires blood sacrifice. In the story of Abraham and Isaac we are told the encouraging truth that God himself will provide the lamb of sacrifice. From

Exodus we learn that the offered lamb provides escape from death. In the activities of the Day Atonement we learn that it is through blood sacrifice that sin is covered and atoned and that through confession our sins are removed. Next, from the prophet Isaiah, we learn a new insight: the lamb to be offered is a person.

Isaiah 53 – The Lamb is a person

⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.
⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

The next major development in the theology of the Lamb of God occurs in chapter fifty-three of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is writing about one whom the Lord God will send. The one God will send is a “Suffering Servant.” This “Suffering Servant” is likened to a lamb that is silent before its shearers or like a lamb that is led willingly to the slaughter. The Suffering Servant is likened to the Scapegoat, for God lays upon him the sin and iniquity of others. He carries the punishment that others deserved and it is by his sacrifice that peace is made between God and his people. The astonishing revelation of this prophetic passage is the recognition that the Lamb of God is a person. The sacrifices offered daily, weekly, monthly, and annually by the priests of Israel on behalf of God’s people will one day find their meaning and fulfillment in one who will be sent by God to be the perfect sacrifice, the “Suffering Servant.”

This is the sweep of the imagery of the Lamb of God as we find it in the Old Testament. This is the progressive revelation of the truth of God’s purposes. From Abel we learn that it upon the basis of blood sacrifice that we are enabled to approach God. From Abraham and Isaac we are given the promise that God himself will provide the needed sacrifice. From the Passover and from the Day of Atonement we learn the truth of what the Lamb of God will accomplish on our behalf. The Lamb of God will deal with the reality of death and will provide atonement, covering for sin. Finally, from Isaiah we learn that the Lamb of God is not an animal, but a person. The Lamb of God will be a person, one sent by God to bear the sins of many, to carry the punishment others deserved.

John 1 – The Lamb of God is the person of Jesus Christ

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!

In John’s Gospel we meet the person of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist sees him approaching and declares that he is **the** Lamb of God. The Lamb of God is the person of Jesus Christ. This is the first thing John wants us to know about Jesus. He is the one who will fulfill the promise given by Abraham that ‘God himself will

provide a lamb.' He is the Lamb by whose sacrifice the angel of death will be thwarted. He is the Lamb of God by whom perfect atonement will be made and through whom the sins of God's people will be dealt with decisively. He is the Lamb of God whom the prophet Isaiah pointed to in his portrait of the Suffering Servant.

There are many things that can and should be said about the work and ministry of Jesus Christ. He was a great teacher and his wisdom and insight continues to guide and instruct people today. He was a great miracle worker, bringing wholeness and healing to many. He provides an example of perfect devotion and prayer to God. He was obedient to the Father and is a model for us in our desire to lead lives pleasing to God. He called disciples and sent them on his mission. He offered to many forgiveness and hope. He reached out to the marginalized and downtrodden people. He inspired many to repent and commit themselves again to faithful service to God. All of these things and more Jesus Christ did. But when he is first presented to us in John's Gospel, when he is first identified and he begins his earthly ministry, the way in which he is identified is as 'the Lamb of God.' The first thing that is said at the beginning of Christ's ministry is to point to its end: that he would give himself as a sacrifice for sin. It is not surprising, then, when we consider that half of John's gospel is given to telling the stories and the teachings of the last week of Jesus' life on earth.

The imagery of the Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God does not end with John chapter one. There are two other significant revelations regarding the Lamb found in the last book of the Bible, Revelation. In Revelation 5 we learn that the Lamb of God alone is worthy.

Revelation 5 – The Lamb of God alone is Worthy

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" ³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. ⁴ I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. ⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." ⁶ Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits ^a of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.

In Revelation chapter 5 John is telling of the vision he had of heaven. In the vision he sees God seated upon this heavenly throne and in God's hand is a scroll, sealed with seven seals, and on that scroll is writing. The scroll is a symbol of the meaning of life, the purposes of God in the unfolding of history. The cry goes up in heaven asking, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" At first John is distressed and he weeps, for no one is found who is worthy to take the scroll and look inside it. In his tears he is told by one of the elders escorting him in his vision

to cease his crying, for one has been found who is worthy – the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. He is able. Then, in a moment of surprise, John looks up, expecting to see a lion, the king of the beasts, one who is the personification of strength, magnificence and authority. John looks, and instead, he sees ‘a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain.’ The point, of course, is that Jesus Christ is both the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God. It is the Lamb of God who takes the scroll. It is the Lamb who had been slain who is the interpreter of the meaning and purposes of God in human history. The sweep of human history finds its meaning, its fulfillment, its significance in the cross of Christ.

And, from Revelation 22, we are told that the Lamb of God is the source of life.

Revelation 22 – The Lamb of God is the source of Life

²²I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

The final reference to Lamb of God is appropriately found in the last two chapters of the Bible, in Revelation 21 and 22. John sees the glory of the New Jerusalem and he notices that there is no temple in it. There is no need for a temple, for God the Father and the Lamb of God are its temple. Nor is there a sun in the sky. There is no need for sun, for the Lamb of God is the light. John sees the River of Life flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. He sees the Tree of Life, the tree that Adam and Eve and the human community left behind when they were driven from the Garden of Eden. All that had been lost is now restored. This is the end that is purposed in the plan of God for the world he has made. This is the end that has been made possible, that has been brought to fulfillment, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

Close

It is difficult to overstate the significance of John the Baptist's declaration on the banks of the Jordan River that day as Jesus of Nazareth approached. The idea of God's sacrificial lamb is found in the pages of scripture from the beginning to the end. The Lamb of God is God's means to deal with the reality of human sinfulness, preserving God's justice, while offering God's mercy.

In the book of Revelation John speaks of those who are in the heavenly vision that he sees. Those who are present before the throne of God are those whose names have been written in the "Lamb's Book of Life." Not everyone is in heaven, not everyone has their name written in that book of life. The way to find one's name in the Lamb's Book of Life is by placing one's faith in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God and trusting him for salvation. It is the same choice that was before Cain and Abel. Cain chose his own way. He chose on his own what he would offer to God. He expected God to be satisfied with that and to accept him, Cain, on the basis of what Cain did and offered from his own efforts. Abel, in contrast, offered the lamb he had sacrificed as a substitute. He knew that he was not worthy to come before God on his own authority. The lamb's death, the lamb's blood was a substitute. It died, in order that Abel might live in God's presence. The way of Abel is open and available to those who will lay claim to it. Sacrifices are no longer needed for the one perfect sacrifice has been given in Christ. Rather, what is needed is to turn to Christ in faith, claiming his sacrifice as the one and only sure basis upon which we dare to come into God's presence.

I am inviting you to Christ today. Place your faith in him, the Lamb of God.

Say 'Amen' Somebody

John 1:29 – 34

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.”