

“The Lamb of God”

The Sixth in a Series on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 1:29-34, Isaiah 52:12-53:12

God sent John the Baptist to bear witness to Israel about the one coming after him—the word become flesh and Israel’s Messiah. John has faithfully fulfilled his mission which now comes to an end when John identifies Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The crowds which had come to hear John and receive his baptism will now be introduced to that one greater than John, that one about whom John had been speaking. There is no more need to for John to “prepare the way,” because the way, the truth, and the life, has now come. The messianic ministry of Jesus is about to begin.

We continue to work our way through the Gospel of John. Last week we spent our time in verses 19-28 of John chapter 1, discussing the significant role which John the Baptist plays in redemptive history. The Baptist has been sent by God to give testimony (“bearing witness”) about the one who was coming after him—Jesus, the Messiah. In the prologue of his gospel (vv. 6-8), John the Disciple (and the author of this Gospel) introduced us to John the Baptist as follows. *“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.”* The Baptist has been sent by God to bear witness about that one coming after him, Jesus Christ, the word become flesh. From the prologue we know that John the Baptist is herald (forerunner) of the Messiah, and that when the Baptist appears out in the wilderness to bear witness about the light shining in the darkness, we know that Israel’s Messiah is about to be revealed.

John the Disciple has not only told us about John the Baptist in his prologue, he has also told us about the word become flesh (*logos*). John has told us that the eternal word was with God in the beginning, indicating that Jesus is God, and he is a distinct person from the father (and therefore, the second person of the Holy Trinity). The Disciple also tells us that the word is *“the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”* Jesus is the word become flesh (in his incarnation), who did so to save us from our sins (John’s metaphor for our sinfulness is darkness) and to grant us authority to become children of God—something we cannot do by natural means (either our birth or an act of our wills). To be a child of God requires the new birth, and a new creation every bit as supernatural as that moment when God spoke and created the world. Yet, when Jesus came bringing light (grace and truth) to his own people, sadly they either did not know him, or else they rejected him.

As we move into the opening section of the body of John’s Gospel (the balance of the first chapter), we read more about the Baptist’s witness-bearing to the one coming after him. In order to bear witness about the light, John the Baptist began preaching about the kingdom of God and baptizing repentant sinners out in the Judean wilderness. He was also attracting huge crowds. Messianic speculation was rife throughout Israel and John’s preaching fell on receptive ears. John’s role as messianic forerunner meant that his mission was to bear witness about the *logos* (the word made flesh). So far, John the Disciple has informed us that Jesus is the light who comes into the world of darkness so that men and women might believe. John the Baptist realized that one coming after him was pre-eminent because he was pre-existent

(as the eternal word). In verse 15, we read, “*John bore witness about him, and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’*”

As we saw last time when we covered vv. 19-28, John the Baptist was the Elijah to come before the great and terrible day of the Lord (as foretold in Malachi 4). John’s was the voice out in the wilderness foretold by Isaiah (chapter 40), who would call for the roads and highways to be repaired so that the nations may flock to Israel’s Messiah in the messianic age. John’s diet and appearance not only tied him to the description of Elijah in 2 Kings, but John’s message (“the bearing of testimony about the one coming after him”) meant that John was the last of the Old Testament prophets who came to bring God’s final indictment against Israel for repeatedly violating the terms of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. As we saw, Jesus called John a prophet and said of him in Matthew 11:11, “*truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.*”

When John the Baptist called for repentance and baptized people for the forgiveness of sins, this was Israel’s final warning and the last chance to repent and turn to YHWH. The appearance of John out in the wilderness meant that the one coming after him—whose sandals John was unworthy to untie—would dispense both covenant blessings and covenant curses. When John appears and begins preaching, it means that the Messiah was right behind him, and once the Messiah is revealed it would be too late.

Although he was far out in the Judean wilderness east of the Jordan, John the Baptist was confronted by a delegation sent by the Jewish religious leadership in Jerusalem. A group of priests and Levites (mostly Sadducees) were sent by the Pharisees (or there were Pharisees in their number) to question John, who was himself the son of a priest and Levite (Zechariah). This is a remarkable fact in itself because the Pharisees and Sadducees were political and theological rivals and couldn’t stand one another. But once the light began to shine in the wilderness, these enemies immediately allied themselves, and eventually found John out in the wilderness, and confronted him by asking him a series of questions about who he was, and what he was doing.

When challenged by his inquisitors, John confessed that he was not the Messiah, nor “the prophet,” nor was he Elijah come back from heaven. He was that voice crying out in the wilderness warning Israel that the Messiah was soon to come and that the people of Israel had better prepare for the coming judgment through repentance. What the delegation from Jerusalem seemed to be concerned about was that John was going about his mission without their permission or sanction. By whose authority was he doing these things? But the size of the crowds listening to John’s preaching surely added insult to injury.

If the Messiah was soon to come, surely he would appear first to Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem, not to some lonely voice in the wilderness who ate weird stuff and dressed like Elijah. Surely, the Messiah would commend them for their collective zeal for the law and for their personal righteousness. This kind of thinking is the epitome of those who love darkness rather than light. This is why John the Baptist, and later on, Jesus, would offend the religious leaders so much. They hated that light which exposed their righteousness to be nothing but self-righteousness, and therefore sin.

John the Disciple does not tell us the outcome of this mini-debate between the Baptist and those sent from Jerusalem to confront him, only that it happened on the opposite side of the Jordan (out in the sticks). But the Gospel does tell us what happened the very next day. In verse 29, we read that John continued to testify about that one coming after him (the word become flesh), speaking of him in terms which will change the entire course of redemptive history.

So, as we turn to our text (vv. 29-34 of John 1), John the Disciple describes what happened next out in the Judean wilderness. “*The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’*” In these six verses, we have come the climax of John the Baptist’s testimony regarding Jesus Christ, the eternal word made flesh.

The delegation of Jews is not mentioned, neither is the location. Given John’s mention of Bethany (the other Bethany) in verse 25, the location is probably the same as in vv. 19-28, out in the sticks, east of the Jordan. Either the delegation from Jerusalem has left, or else they are witnesses to John’s remarkable testimony about the one who was coming after him. There is no mention of an audience, but it is assumed that those who followed John out into the wilderness to hear him preach are present. No longer is John’s testimony a response to hostile questions, now he is bearing witness as to Jesus’ true identity¹

When John sees Jesus approaching (John has already baptized Jesus at some point prior to this encounter) John declares of him “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*” As we read in the synoptic gospels, John has had much to say about Jesus, but this statement is quite remarkable in many ways. After witnessing what happened at Jesus’ baptism (as recounted in Matthew 3:13-17) this may even be the characteristic way the Baptist refers to Jesus in his later preaching. When John calls Jesus the “Lamb of God” what does he mean, and what is the background to this title?

There are two important issues to consider here. The first is the Jewish background to John the Baptist’s labeling Jesus as the Lamb, and the second is the way in which Christians use this title of Jesus in the decades after Jesus suffered, died, was raised, and then ascended into heaven (i.e., in the mid-eighties of the first century when John writes this gospel). In other words, does the title “Lamb of God” have an eschatological sense in addition to a sacrificial sense? The answer is “yes.”

As for the Jewish background—the meaning of this title to the original audience who heard John say this while out in the wilderness—the primary idea is that John is declaring that it is Jesus who will propitiate God’s wrath and anger toward sinners, reconciling God to them, and sinners to God. At this point in Israel’s history, this act of turning aside God’s wrath was accomplished not by the baptism of someone like John, but in the Jerusalem temple where the priests sacrificed a year-old lamb every morning and evening as a sin offering. John the Baptist was the son of a temple priest, knew this ritual very well, but has now distanced himself from it, instead, obeying God’s call to go out into the wilderness to call Israel to repent of sin and receive his baptism of repentance.

The very next day after being confronted by priests and Levites (men who themselves performed the daily sacrifices in the temple), John sees Jesus approach and calls Jesus “the Lamb of God.” This is a clear declaration that with the coming of the light (grace and truth) into the world of darkness (sin and willful ignorance of the truth) everything associated with God’s redemptive purposes has now fundamentally changed. Instead of a twice daily sacrifice of a year-old lamb, God will now provide a final, once for all, sacrifice for sin to which the sacrificial lambs pointed. The story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 was unfolding all over again in the life of Israel. God himself was going to provide his people with a single sacrifice for sin which takes away the sin of the world—he would give them the true sinless and spotless Lamb of God. There will be one final and all sufficient sacrifice for sin, and it would be offered by Jesus, the one even then approaching John the Baptist out in the wilderness.

¹ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 69.

The other implication we should draw from John's statement is that if Jesus is the final, once for all, sacrifice for sin, then what role would the Jerusalem temple and the priests and Levites who just questioned him continue to play? When the gospel was written by John at some point after AD 70, the Jewish and Gentile readers of the Gospel understood that "Lamb of God" was an appropriate title for Jesus, because Jesus did indeed suffer and die on the cross to turn aside God's wrath and anger toward us because of our sins. When Jesus died on the cross, the entire sacrificial system and priesthood would pass away—rendered completely and totally obsolete. The destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD 70 made perfect sense in the light of Jesus' sacrifice for sin a generation earlier.

But the audience standing there when John the Baptist was preaching the day after being confronted by those who conducted the sacrifices in the temple, would not have understood "Lamb of God" as an exalted title, but they would have understood (or should have) the point John is making. Jesus was going to put the temple out of business—a shocking and necessary implication of identifying this man as the Lamb of God. When John calls Jesus the "lamb of God" he is saying that the old covenant is about to be fulfilled. John is saying that a new covenant is about to be ratified by the blood of that one who will take away the sins of the world. When John calls Jesus "lamb of God" the Baptist is saying that Jesus is the true temple of God (a point which will be made explicitly in the next chapter, 2:19). John is also saying that Jesus will fulfill all of the Jewish feasts and ceremonies.² As the Lamb of God, Jesus will humble himself to the point of death and make that one sacrifice which accomplishes the salvation of those to whom God chooses to give eternal life.

Although Jesus humbles himself and thereby fulfills the suffering servant prophecy foretold in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (which we read as our Old Testament lesson), John the Disciple also emphasizes the fact throughout the Gospel that as the word become flesh (Jesus as God incarnate), Jesus also has the power and authority to make such a sacrifice for sin—a theme we will see in chapters 3, 6, and 13 of this gospel. Indeed as we read in John 10:17-18, "*for this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.*" Jesus did not die as the Lamb against his will. He lay down his life. The fact that Jesus has such authority explains why Christians living after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple see John's declaration "the Lamb of God," as an exalted title ascribed to Jesus in addition to describing the humble, suffering Savior who would die upon the cross to offer an all-sufficient sacrifice for sin.

Ironically, the humble servant is that one who also judges the nations—as foretold in Isaiah 42. In verses 1-2, of Isaiah 42, we read, "*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.*" The humble servant of Isaiah 52-53 who lays down his life in suffering so that our iniquities might be washed away, will also bring justice to the nations as well. Since I take John the Disciple to be the author of the Book of Revelation, it is significant that in Revelation 5, John repeatedly speaks of the Lamb who was slain. In John's vision, the heavenly church bows before the Lamb, climaxing in the great declaration of Revelation 5:13, "*and I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!'*" Among John's many depictions of the Lamb in Revelation, we read that the church is the bride of the Lamb (Rev. 21:9), that we are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14), and the Lamb's wrath will be the undoing of the nations on the day of judgment (Rev. 6:16).

² Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 73-74.

When John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God he is saying to those out in the wilderness who had gathered to hear John preach that this man who has just approached (Jesus) is about to fulfill everything promised in the Old Testament, and extend God's gracious salvation from sin to ends of the earth just as Israel's prophets had foretold. This man, John says, will humble himself unto death as foretold in Isaiah 52-53, and deal with human sin, once and for all. It is no wonder that Christians reading John's Gospel a generation later, would speak of Jesus in an exalted sense, referring to him as the "Lamb of God," a title referring to his glorious exaltation, authority, and power throughout the Book of Revelation.

In verses 30-34, John the Baptist recounts how it is that he came to believe that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Echoing verse 15 of the prologue, we read of John's testimony in verse 30, "*This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'*" Jesus is the eternal word, who has clothed his glory in human flesh and made his dwelling among us. Clearly, Jesus' true identity has been revealed by God to the Baptist. Jesus is "before" John because he (Jesus) is pre-existent, and therefore pre-eminent. John knows that he must decrease as the Messiah begins to teach and preach. His role as messianic forerunner is coming to an end.

Much the same can be seen in verse 31. John was not numbered among Jesus' disciples, because his mission was to prepare the way for one who now approaches. He was not a follower of Jesus, but a forerunner of Jesus. Says John, simply, "*I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.*" Until baptizing him, John did not know that Jesus was the coming one. John may have known Jesus for some time before his baptism, given the fact that his mother Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary were related (possibly cousins). John obeyed God's call, began preaching and teaching, waiting for the one to come. But when Jesus came to John to be baptized in the Jordan, it was then that it became clear to John just who Jesus was—the word made flesh and the Messiah of Israel.

Ever-faithful to his own calling, as Jesus came near them, John now tells the crowds who this man truly is. "*And John bore witness: 'I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 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.'*" When John heard the voice from heaven at some point before Jesus approached John out in the wilderness, John saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus. John now knew the identity of the one coming after him. In the synoptic gospels, we read that Jesus was the one who witnessed these things, but now we learn that it was at this moment that the Baptist learned the identity of the Messiah. John baptized with water. But the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit—something Jesus himself will explain in great detail in the upper room discourse later on the John's Gospel.

John knew that the prophecy of Isaiah 42 regarding the Lord's servant, and the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-3 was being fulfilled. It was Isaiah who wrote of the coming Messiah, "*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, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.*" The day foretold by Isaiah had come. Although some in the Old Testament received the Holy Spirit in a temporary manner, in John 3:34 we read that Jesus has been given the Spirit without limit or measure. When Jesus received the Holy Spirit in a permanent manner, there is a huge shift in God's redemptive economy from promise and

anticipation to fulfillment and reality. The messianic age has begun, and the Messiah is ready to begin his work.

That John is sent from the heavenly court to bring Israel her final summons to the bar of judgment and to call the nation and its people to repentance is clear from the language of verse 34. “*And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.*” John the Baptist has been sent from God to bear witness about Jesus (the coming one) to the people of Israel. He has done so. But John now tells us that the same eternal word who created and sustains all things, who took to himself a true human nature and came to earth as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world, is also the very son of God. If we are God’s children it is only by God’s authority (election) that we have been adopted, but Jesus is the eternal son of God because he was with God in the beginning. Jesus has always been God’s son.

Having made this remarkable declaration about Jesus, John the Baptist will now fade away. Next time we will take up the account of what happened the very next day—the third day in this sequence of events: day one, the inquisition of priests and Levites; day two, John’s testimony that Jesus is the Lamb of God—when Jesus calls his first disciples on day three. It is to that event we will turn next Lord’s day.

When John the Baptist calls “Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” he is declaring that the Son of God has come and is about to begin his messianic mission. The old covenant will soon become obsolete and a new covenant will soon be ratified through the sacrificial blood of the word made flesh. The Baptist must now decrease, his mission now fulfilled. But the coming one’s ministry is about to begin, and that ministry will take him to the cross. Although veiled by human flesh, Jesus’ divine glory soon will be apparent through his teaching and his miracles.

When the Baptist proclaims that Jesus will “take away” the sins of the world, he is affirming that Jesus’ death is sufficient to remove the guilt of sin from the mass of fallen humanity. There is no other sacrifice needed or necessary. Yet, we learn from other New Testament passages that Jesus’ death is not intended to make everyone savable, if only they meet certain conditions (faith and repentance). Rather, the Baptist is telling those gathered that since Jesus is the “Lamb of God,” then Jesus will offer that final, once for all, sacrifice through which God will save all those who believe. John has already told us in chapter 1:13, that those who believe, must be granted this faith by God’s authority (election). By speaking of Jesus as the Lamb of God, John is revealing to the crowds that Jesus will die as a sacrifice for sin (just like the lambs twice offered daily in the temple), but that his sacrifice will do what the blood of the sacrificial lambs cannot—take away the guilt of our sin, once and for all.

So, before John the Disciple even begins his account of the messianic mission of Jesus in the balance of the Gospel of John, we already know that Jesus will die for sinners, and that his death will render the entire Old Testament sacrificial and its temple obsolete. When Jesus approaches John out in the wilderness, John tells the crowd that redemptive history has reached its climax. Everything is about to change. The Baptist has borne witness to the truth. John has identified Jesus as the Lamb of God and the Son of God. The people of Israel now know that the Messiah is at hand. Jesus is about to begin his public ministry and calling his first disciples.

The Baptist’s testimony is now before us. We have heard his testimony, just as the crowds did when Jesus first approached John in the wilderness. The question we must ask and then answer is simply this: “do we believe John’s testimony?” “Is Jesus the Son of God?” “Is Jesus the sinless and spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?” “Do we trust that his death will take away our sins, so that we might stand before God without guilt, and without fear?” This is why John the Baptist has come—“*He*

came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.”