

Jesus: The Lamb of God

DAVE BAST

One of the truly great, illuminating images for Jesus Christ in the New Testament is the Lamb of God. This word picture points not so much to his character or nature or personality, but rather to the primary purpose for which he came; he is the true sacrifice, provided by God himself, once offered on the cross for the sins of the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, we are concluding a series today. We are wrapping up the fourth of four programs that have to do with these great images or metaphors, I guess, or word pictures, maybe, that describe Jesus Christ – sort of illuminate his character. Way back in the first one, you used the analogy of a diamond with a thousand facets, and every time you turn it, you see some new truth or new beauty in the person of Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we said, ironically, just by virtue of putting this series together, and where you find these various pictures and images of Jesus, they end up being a lot in the first chapters of a lot of books, and here again today, we are going to think about Jesus as the Lamb of God, which brings us back to the same first chapter that we looked at in the first program on Jesus as the Word of God, and that is John Chapter 1; we have gotten past the prologue. Jesus had called a couple of the first disciples, and now John the Baptist is doing his ministry, and then in John 1, starting at verse 29, we read:

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

DAVE BAST

That is John’s testimony – that is the heart of it from the fourth Gospel, another John writing these words about the man we call John the Baptist; and that first phrase from verse 29: Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. One of the great sentences of the New Testament. That really says it all, and this image, this central picture of Jesus as the Lamb of God. It strikes me that whatever you may think of him or however you may conceive of Jesus or what you have learned or read about him, if you do not come to grips with this, you have missed the real Jesus – who he really is.

I studied in the early 1970s at Fuller Seminary in California, and my Church History professor was Geoffrey Bromily, who was a great translator of German theological works. He translated all of Karl Barth. So, we used to get quite a bit about Barth, and there was one story I loved. Barth was teaching at the University of Basel in Switzerland; and one day he was riding a streetcar and a man came and he was obviously a tourist

and he sat down and Barth chatted with him in a friendly way and said: Oh, is there anything in Basel you especially wish to see? And the man said: Yes, I want to see the great theologian, Karl Barth. Do you know him? And Barth smiled and kind of mischievously said: Know him! I shave him every morning. And the guy went away thrilled because he thought he had met Karl Barth's barber; but he missed it. He was that close and he missed it. If you do not know Jesus this way, you have missed it, somehow.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, that is right. What is interesting, though, John the Baptist says, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin or the world." Then if you jump down to verse 35, he will say it again the next day. John was there again with two of his disciples, and when he saw Jesus passing, he said: Look, Lamb of God. So, John says it twice in John 1, but what is interesting is that that is the only place in the whole Bible where the exact phrase, Lamb of God, is used. So, it kind of looks like this was something John the Baptist coined. There is a lot of background; we will get to it in just a minute; but that exact phrase – this might be a neologism, we say. It is a phrase John made up; a phrase John coined; which sort of makes me wonder, the people who first heard it, what did they think? Was calling somebody a Lamb of God a nice thing to say? We love the phrase now; we are so used to it. We think it is all over the Bible. The truth is, it is only here; but, lambs were – well, when you think of a lamb, you think of one of two things: It is kind of dumb or it is going to die. Did the people who first heard this hear him say: Behold the loser or behold the dead man walking? Was it complimentary to be called a lamb? A lot of people probably thought: No, that is kind of cruel. It is like calling somebody a dumb bunny. Maybe that is how some heard it.

DAVE BAST

Well, I do not know; I think we also probably have a problem with how we visualize it, because to us, lamb – well, you know, none of us probably has much experience directly with sheep or lambs, so we think of it – we see it in a picture book for kids or something and we think nice, frolicky, little, frisky, white lamb out in the meadow jumping around; but we really, I think, are forced to read this in terms of the Old Testament background, and the imagery is all drawn from sacrifice. So, obviously, you think immediately of the Passover with any kind of biblical background or knowledge; and actually, though, this phrase, as you point out, Lamb of God only appears once. Paul does say – he calls Christ our Passover in 1 Corinthians 10, and says: Christ our Passover has been sacrificed. So, there he draws explicitly the connection to the Passover lamb; so if you remember that background from Exodus, when God is going to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt, he says to them – now, okay, they go through the series of plagues, and none of them actually convinces Pharaoh finally to let the people go; so then they get to this last night when something terrible is really going to happen, and God gives them directives about what they need to do with this lamb.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is put the blood on the doorposts and to kill it and they get saved through the blood of the lamb. Interestingly, that surely – as I said – if John kind of made this up, and called Jesus the Lamb, the phrase was enough to make some disciples immediately start following Jesus. They left John the Baptist and they said: We are going to follow this rabbi; maybe because they wanted to know what that was going to mean. What does it mean to be a Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? We have to find out what kind of a person would fit that particular bill.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and I think just that phrase, Lamb of God, or God's Lamb; I take that to mean the lamb that God provides, not the lamb that we provide; and that would have suggested to them – those first disciples, steeped in the Old Testament and the imagery of sacrifice – it would have suggested another story from Genesis 22, of Abraham about to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on the mountain. He is stopped by an angel, and he says... In fact, earlier Isaac asked: We have the fire, we have the wood; where is the animal? And Abraham says: God will provide one; and here it is. Here is the Lamb that God will provide.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Lamb of God. It is God's lamb in the sense that he is the One who sent him to the world, but he came to the world to do something very, very specific, and John wants us to understand that. So, in a moment we will look at how John describes what Jesus as the Lamb of God will do.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and today's program, wrapping up different pictures of Jesus in the New Testament; different ways by which the Apostles tried to explain all of the incredible fullness of what happens when God gets made into a human being; endless, endless ways to think about it and describe it; but we have picked out just a few for this series, and today it is the Lamb of God – this thing that John the Baptist, and only John the Baptist ever said or wrote about Jesus – that specific phrase, anyway: The Lamb of God; but not just the Lamb of God, but specifically, he said the first time the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so let's focus on that second phrase. He takes away the sin of the world as the Lamb of God. Where does that lead us, and it leads us deep into the New Testament; deep into the Old Testament as well. It leads us into a subject that is controversial, I guess, today for a lot of people. A lot of people really do not like this part of historic, orthodox, Christian teaching, and that is that Jesus, through the sacrifice of himself, through his own death, through his blood – the blood of the Lamb – somehow that had to happen in order for sin to be dealt with from God's perspective.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is, in one of the previous programs in this series we looked at Jesus as the Wisdom of God, and as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1: The Wisdom of God is revealed at the cross. Paul says that is a stumbling block. That trips people up; the idea that you needed a bloody cross; and it trips people up today. There are a lot of people who say: Surely God could have done it another way. Surely God should have done it another way. Maybe what happened to Jesus was just a bad political thing with the Romans; but God could have saved us without that bloody sacrifice. What kind of a father would abuse his own son? Sometimes the image of child abuse actually gets laid at the feet of some classical atonement theories of how we get saved. People still find this to be a stumbling block; a scandal, as we said in that previous program. They still have a hard time accepting that somehow or other, this sacrifice – this particular human Passover lamb had to be sacrificed somehow to set things to right.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, there is a beautiful story in the Gospels. It is told in Mark 2 in one place, and other parallels, where this paralyzed guy is brought by his four friends to see Jesus for healing and they cannot get near him so they open the roof – you remember story – they let him down, and Jesus looks at the guy, and very interestingly, he says to him: My son, your sins are forgiven.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

That is what he says to him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

First!

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it scandalizes the onlookers; especially the chief priest and Jesus' inveterate enemies, and they say: (grumbling) This guy – that is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins. And then Jesus looks at them and he says: Okay, just to show that I have the authority to do this, rise up and walk; and the guy gets up and carries his bed out. So, we think: Yes, that is simple enough. I can get that. Why doesn't God just say: Your sins are forgiven? I have the authority. I have the power. But the rest of the New Testament shows us that even God has to do something else first.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; the other thing I love about that story, Dave, about their digging a hole through the roof and lowering the guy; I have often wondered what the reaction of the friends who went through all that trouble was, and what the reaction of the paralyzed guy was. Obviously, they had not gone through all of that trouble to get this guy lowered in front of Jesus to have his sins forgiven. They wanted him to fix his legs. What in the world? It is sort of like stopping at a terrible traffic accident on the highway and the people in the front seat are bleeding and they are hurting and you just say: Would you like some coffee? It is like, that is not the right thing to say here; but Jesus knows that as bad as it is to be paralyzed or to have other disease or sickness or whatever, our real problem is sin, and Jesus is going to see that first and deal with that first because that is why he came into the world. He came to take away the sin of the world. That is the main event: Forgiveness, restoration, atonement. That is where Jesus will always start because that is why he came, and it will not be finished until he says it is finished, and he will say that from a cross.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and the reason that he has the authority to do that so freely is because he is the one who will pay the price, and that gets us back to this stumbling block you were talking about earlier.

You know, there is a passage in 1 Peter – in fact, 1 Peter talks quite a bit about this; this idea of Christ redeeming us; not with silver and gold, but with his own precious blood; and then in Chapter 2 Peter writes: He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree. So, he takes away – he bears them – he lifts them off of us and puts them on himself, and he does that on the cross; and yes, there are depths of mystery here that we cannot plumb, but somehow we have to believe, I think, that God himself needs to undertake this in order to remain himself as he forgives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. One or both of us have mentioned this on previous programs here on *Groundwork*, but I always remember one of my theological teachers at seminary said: We do not always think about this, but if you do think about it, what a revelation it is from the Bible that somehow in scripture redemption, salvation, looks like it was a whole lot harder for God to pull off than creation. Creation just goes boom, boom, boom: Let there be light; let there be waters – boom, boom; God said and it was – boom, boom, boom.... so, there is the whole creation done just nice and tidy and neat and quick, according to the narrative; and then sin comes and the whole rest of the Bible is about getting rid of it; and it is not done until that Son of God has taken all of the sins. He did not have any sins of his own to pay for. That is the traditional teaching of the Church. Jesus was guiltless and sinless and free of the stain of original sin. So, he took our sins; and somehow God could not just wish them away. He could not sweep them under the rug. Sin is serious. So serious that it was actually harder to get rid of than it was to make the creation in the first place, and that is quite startling.

DAVE BAST

In our last program we talked quite a bit about what it means to be the image of God and how we humans were originally created perfect and upright in that image, and we vandalized it – we wrecked it – and that is what makes sin such a terrible thing; and another thing that makes sin so terrible is what it cost God to undo it. There is a great line by the early 20th Century theologian, James Denney, who says that we do not really, truly repent until we see sin as God sees it, and what he does about it in Christ. Only then, faced with that

enormity, we really will seek to turn from it and turn to him.

There is another great Old Testament picture of this sin-bearing Jesus, and that is the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; sin just could not be wished away, it had to be sent away; so in the Old Testament, the people would lay their hands on the scapegoat's head, and basically it was a symbolic transfer of their sins, and then they would send the goat packing. The goat would just have to go off into the wilderness, where it would die eventually; and that was a symbolic way of separating themselves from sin. It was a foreshadowing of Jesus; the book of Hebrews does a ton with that later – Hebrews 10: If lambs and bulls and goats got a little bit of forgiveness for their sacrifice, think about how much more – always that “how much more” argument – how much more was the perfect Son of God sacrificed to get rid of all sin; and that is what God did. It is mysterious; it defies logic; but there it is.

DAVE BAST

And it is a picture of our repentance, too; our identifying with him, that scapegoat idea, because, yes, he bears away the sin of the whole world, but for it to really have an effect on you or on me, we need to put our hands on his head and identify with him. We need to see that enormity. We do need to repent. It does not happen automatically to everybody. I cannot see that in the Bible. I think the Bible calls us to repentance and faith and obedience and becoming followers of Jesus if we want him to truly be our sin bearer.

But anyway, there is one last point to make, and we are going to turn to that next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at yet another picture of Jesus in the New Testament as the Lamb of God. We said John the Baptist was the one to coin the phrase: The Lamb of God – behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But that Lamb picture comes up one more time, and that is with John in Patmos. He has this vision of heaven; not heaven as it will be in the future, but God pulls the curtain back to show him what goes on every single day, and he sees the worship of the angels; he sees the worship of the saints; and in the middle of it all, the One that they are worshipping is a Lamb, John says in Revelation 5 – a Lamb looking like it had been slain; and that was the One before whom everybody was falling down and worshipping with all of those: Worthy is the Lamb; worthy is the Lamb that was slain – that famous song.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is so interesting in Revelation 5 because John is wondering who is going to take control of this scroll that seems to be pointing to just the final consummation of all things, and the purposes of God, and who is in control of it all; and he hears this voice that say: The Lion of the tribe of Judah. The Lion! That is the Messiah. That is the conqueror. He is a lion; he can do it. And John goes: Oh, good. And then he turns and looks, and in contrast to what he hears – he hears the title Lion; what he sees is the Lamb. And the Lamb has been slaughtered. Its throat has been cut; and yet, it is the Lamb who is at the center of all of the purposes of God, and the Lamb who is on the throne.

Richard Bauckham, a great scholar of the book of Revelation, and the Johannine literature in general, says that what this picture is trying to show us is that God is on the throne, but that is in heaven. He does reign over all, but here in the world, it does not really look like God is on the throne, does it, as we look around. Here he is still present, and until the end comes, he is present as the sacrificed Lamb.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, it is interesting to me – it goes without saying, obviously I have not seen every stained-glass window in the world; I have not seen every piece of art in the world – but what strikes me, Dave, often is that this Lamb in Revelation 5 is often depicted on stained-glass windows in a lot of churches, but I have yet to see a stained-glass window that has a lamb looking like it had been slaughtered. They all look kind of – they

are lambs and all – but they have flags in their mouths or they look kind of triumphant...

DAVE BAST

Yes, flags in their mouths... They are sitting on the book with the seven seals, and all that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

John saw a lamb that looked like it had been hit by a truck. It is like road-kill lamb or something. It is a lamb with Xs for eyes; like you sometimes see dead cows depicted; this is a lamb that had been through it. This is a lamb that looked like it had been slaughtered, which is a very raw picture, but it is a reminder of what had to happen to get us saved; and maybe, Dave, you said a minute ago: Read the newspapers, click on the CNN website any day, does the world look like it is being ruled by God? Nah, most of the time it looks out of control; but maybe seeing a slain lamb as a reminder that that is how God is in control of a broken world, that slain lamb has all the troubles in it already. It has already absorbed all of that. That is the kind of God who looks like he might, indeed, be in charge.

DAVE BAST

And that one last word of John the Baptist: Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In a sense, we are doing this backwards because we are coming last to that first word, but that is a command. That is an imperative. Behold him; look at him; look at him. This is God in our world. This is how God is God in our world. This is what it means to be God. It means to have your hands bound and your feet bound and maybe nailed to a cross, and like a lamb, your throat is cut – in this case, maybe it is a spear in the side – but in all of that weakness and suffering and sacrifice and death, the life and power of God is there. So look; look at him; this is who he is; this is *how* he is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that was John the Baptist's job, right? From what we read earlier from the Gospel of John Chapter 1; he came to be the pointer; and Dave, you reminded me recently of a very famous – well, there are a number of paintings from the Renaissance – but very, very often you will see whenever John the Baptist is depicted in certain strains of European art, he has always got this big... it is often a little exaggeratedly long, bony finger pointing to Jesus on the cross, and to say to people: This is the One; and this is who he is; and this is what he does. Even John will later struggle with that. Once John the Baptist is thrown into prison, the world does not seem to be changing fast enough, and so he asks Jesus, are you the one or shall we wait for somebody else? But Jesus basically tells John: Remember what you said about me in the first place. I am here in weakness and humility and for sacrifice, and that is what will change the world, and did through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

DAVE BAST

You know, you mentioned that great prayer of praise, that anthem of praise that is sung in heaven: Worthy is the Lamb that was slain; and certainly we can join that; but I think of another prayer. Praying this text that we have been looking at from John 1:29; it is the closing prayer of the mass, really, which was basically Christian worship for well over a thousand years; still is for probably a majority of the Church...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, indeed.

DAVE BAST

But they would always have five segments, and the center one was the Creed, where we confess our faith. It begins with confession of sin – the Kyrie – and then there is the Gloria in Excelsis, the song of the angels: Glory to God in the highest; and then after the Creed there is sung the praises of Palm Sunday: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; but the closing prayer is always the Agnus Dei; and it goes: Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; have mercy on us, grant us your peace. And that is a great way, I think, to close this program on the images of God as we worship and adore the Lamb of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen. Well thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com, and tell us topics and passages you would like to hear more about on *Groundwork*.

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