

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part seven

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THE LAMB OF GOD AND THE WORLD'S SIN

John 1:28-34 - "These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. [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."

Amazing things happen in this text - supernatural things. The heavens open up. John hears God speak in some fashion - "...*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'*"(33). And immediately there appears a visible manifestation of the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus in what looks to be something like a dove.

We rarely witness anything like this today. As a general rule, nothing in our daily experience parallels these manifestations. And that's why our text starts with a verse full of dull, pedestrian, ordinary words of time and place - **John 1:28** - "These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing."

And what the apostle John means to convey in those bland words is no Gospel account ever began with the words, "*Once upon a time....*" What John describes isn't fairy tale. What John describes he saw and heard. The events that reach down redemptively into our lives reach down into *history*, not *imagination*. They are *historical*, not *mystical*.

And this is the *unique* glory of the New Testament gospel message. It *reaches* into the experience of the heart. But it's *rooted* in the days of the week and the hours of the clock and the places of simple geography. And what that means is these events aren't just *true for some people who happen to be moved emotionally by them*. These events aren't just made up in the minds of those whom the media loves to call "*people of faith*." They happened *independently of whether or not anyone else believed they happened or cared that they happened*. And the apostle John takes the time to tell us *where*.

How we need this reminder from the New Testament that the foundations of Christian discipleship aren't dependent on the psychological benefits received by them. They're valuable for *all* people first of all because they're *true* - not just because they *work* for *certain* people.

1) **THE VERY FIRST TIME JOHN THE BAPTIST SEES JESUS HE POINTS TO HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS**

John 1:29 - "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"

This is so significant. In the Apostle John's account of the life of Jesus there had as yet been no miracles and no teaching. On the visible, human side of things *nothing* has happened yet. And yet the very first time the Apostle John records Jesus coming into the Baptist's view He is already the *slain Lamb* - the *crucified One*. In other words, right at the *beginning* the *end* is already the object of attention. We, the readers, are already alerted that this pre-existent Word who *was* God and was *with* God is coming to *die*.

And already, God is pictured as taking the *saving initiative*. John the Baptist isn't running after Jesus. Jesus is described as the One *coming to him* - **John 1:29** - "...*he saw Jesus coming toward him....*" We are made aware of divine grace and mercy. John doesn't scrape and grovel to find Messiah's approach. Jesus seeks out John the Baptist.

2) **THE DEFINITE ARTICLES AND THEIR DEFINITE MESSAGE**

John 1:29 - "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, *the* Lamb of God, who takes away *the* sin of *the* world!"

Because no one actually studies grammar anymore, the *definite articles* in this sentence are simply the *“the’s”*- “....‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” And in the Greek you would actually have one more - “....‘Behold, the Lamb of (the) God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”

While this doesn’t make for smooth flowing English it *does* reveal John’s theology. Each definite article makes its own definite point. Jesus is *the* Lamb, *not* one of *many* Lambs being offered for sin. In other words, we are *not* being invited to try Jesus as *one of many possible liberators*. And He’s *not* being offered by just one of *many* possible Gods. He is *the* God’s Lamb - the God who made us and heaven and earth.

And this Lamb isn’t coming and dying to relieve *some* of our sins, while ignoring our deeper issues. There is nothing of human guilt this Lamb’s sacrifice doesn’t remove. He removes *the* sin - the only thing that puts God out of our reach. Now no one is out of reach. This truth is then reinforced by the last definite article. This Lamb’s sacrifice extends, not just to *some* who will believe, but to *the whole world*.

In short, John calls us to come to *the* Lamb, who is sent by *the* God, whose death removed *the* sin, from *the* whole world. Those are some of the best *“the’s”* in the world’s printed language.

3) THE LAMB IS SAID TO DIE FOR OUR SIN - NOT OUR SINS - AND THAT’S AN IMPORTANT DETAIL

John 1:29 - “The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”

The point the Apostle John makes here is more than theological hair-splitting. What the Lamb *“takes away”* - what He *“removes”* - isn’t just a list of bad behaviors. It is not a specific list of *sins* to which John refers but the *root* of those sins - the *sin* in its totality in terms of the *guilt* that our actions bring before a holy God.

In his often liberal commentary on John’s gospel, *Adolf Schlatter* makes an absolutely brilliant observation on this concept of the Lamb removing the *sin* of the world. Follow his words carefully - *“Since ‘the sin’ is taken up and carried away, the word ‘sin’ used here must be deeper than behavior....since behavior, once done, cannot be undone; but the word ‘sin’ means behavior’s continuing result, that which arises out of wicked behavior. The word ‘sin’ means the ongoing guilt before God that our behavior brings.”*

Don’t rush over those important words. The distinction between *sins* (plural) merely as *bad behavior* and *sin* as the continuing *result* of bad behavior as *guilt before God* is the difference between *redemption* and mere *moral improvement*.

This distinction is why we *need* the Lamb of God and His atoning death on the cross. Even if I had the will-power to *quit doing something bad*, what can I do to erase the guilt of those deeds while I was still *doing* them. My moral reform can’t undo deeds already done. I need the *root* and the *guilt* of my sinful actions erased and removed. Jesus has removed my sin in a unique fashion that moral improvement never can. He has removed my sin in the sense of it ever again *being a barrier between God and mankind*.

4) THE LAMB’S SIN REMOVING WORK IS ALWAYS CONTINUOUS AND ONGOING

There is a wonderful truth here that isn’t obvious right on the surface of our English text - John 1:29 - “The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”

And if you and I had easy access to the Greek text that verb phrase *“takes away”* is actually worded in the *present tense*, as if it is happening *even right now* - “....‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who is taking away the sin of the world!’”

This is truly a strange way for John the Baptist to *say* it, because from *his* perspective the Lamb’s sacrificial work is still in the *future tense*. And it’s also a strange way for the Apostle John to *write* about it because from *his* perspective the Lamb’s

sacrificial work had already happened in the *past tense*.

So there stands our text, quite strangely in neither the past nor future tense, but in the *constantly present text* - like the removing of sin by the Lamb is always happening *right now* - "...Behold, the Lamb of God, who is taking away the sin of the world!"

I believe here lies John's point. John the Baptist, who first *spoke* these words, was beheaded. John the Apostle, who first *recorded* these words, has been long dead. And the cross on which the Lamb removed the world's sin is now a 2000 year old event. And John reminds us, in his *present tense* depiction of our sin's removal, that wherever this message is *presently* preached and this truth is *presently* believed, the sin-removing work is *present, immediate, and ongoing*. Where faith is placed in the Lamb of God the *sin removing experience* is a present reality.

Hear presently afresh. Confess and repent, presently afresh. Believe presently afresh. And where this is done, sin is removed as a present reality. This is a constant reality, always in the present tense, until Jesus comes again.

I was thrilled with *Frederick Bruner's* telling words on this important doctrine:

"Churches that leave this vivifying center for what are thought to be more contemporary or relevant or gripping centers or issues sooner or later wither away, as history has shown again and again. Churches that obscure this life-giving Center with a hundred-and-one spiritual disciplines or social-political enthusiasms are eventually overwhelmed with activities and guilt. Steady Christ-crucified-and-risen Churches that, like John the Baptist, keep pointing to the victorious Lamb continue the Baptist's original ministry and so keep "taking away the sin of the world" from the hearts of believing hearers and creating joyful Christians, who advance the mission ever farther and farther into a social and spiritual world that longs to hear believable news and to experience loving care."

5) THE WITNESS OF THE BAPTIST AND THE VOICE FROM HEAVEN

John 1:30-34 - "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."

The witness of the Spirit and the voice from heaven are important points in our text because John the Baptist makes it clear that he had no advance knowledge of who Jesus was or what He might look like. Twice the Baptist points out that, even though Jesus was apparently standing by very close, John didn't have a clue who he was:

John 1:31 - "I myself did not know him..."

John 1:33 - "I myself did not know him..."

So all John had to go by was the fact that he had heard from God directly (**33**) and was alerted to Jesus' identity by the visible descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove (**33**). It is in simple obedience to these two revelations that John dedicates his whole ministry to pointing the world to the Lamb of God.

The voice from heaven is not heard frequently in the New Testament. For the most part, the church, especially after the ascension of Jesus, relies as we do on the teaching of the apostles. But there are *two* occasions where the voice from heaven is heard in the synoptics and two in John's gospel.

In the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) here's what we find. The Father speaks from heaven on two occasions. The first is at Jesus' baptism (not directly recorded by John) - **Matthew 3:16-17** - "And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he

went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; [17] and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

And the voice from heaven speaks again on the Mount of Transfiguration - **Matthew 17:4-5** - "And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." [5] He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

Both of these messages focus on the same thing. The Father in heaven seems bent on making sure the hearers know that Jesus is the Father's unique Son. It's the identity of the Son that is uppermost in the Father's mind. And on the mount we have added the wonderfully obvious, simple exhortation - ***listen to Him!***"

In John's gospel there are also two occasions where the voice from heaven is heard. First, there is the same occasion of Jesus' baptism - **John 1:33** - "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.'"

The second time the voice is heard is found as Jesus is praying in **John 12:27-28** - "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. [28] Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

The difference in John's gospel in the hearing of the voice from heaven is John's emphasis on the Father verifying not just the **identity** of the Son, but the **atonement work** of the Son. It is clearly Father God's intention that redemption and spiritual renewal are to be found exclusively in the Son, the Lamb of God. So the church has the ongoing message to proclaim of the Son as the only **forgiver** of the world's sin and the only **bestower** of the Holy Spirit.

And here's what this means for you and me today. If you want a clean heart and conscience from the actual guilt of sin you must come to the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. And if you want a renewed heart and empowered will to **please** God, you must come to Jesus Christ, the giver of the life-giving Spirit of God who makes all things new.