

“Behold the Lamb of God”

When John the Baptist encountered Jesus at the start of his ministry, he exclaimed:

Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29).

At Jesus’ request, John then baptised him in the River Jordan. When John met Jesus again the following day, he repeated his words to his disciples, who were with him.

Most people who met Jesus reacted strongly to him; he was striking in his perfection and challenging in his message. But what made John, with his knowledge of who Jesus was and what was his mission, use these particular words?

The answer lies in the principles around how God was going to reconcile men and women to Himself through the work of Jesus. The pattern was laid down in the Old Testament and fulfilled by Jesus in the New Testament.

Old Testament Sacrifices

The principle of animal sacrifice was established right at the beginning, in the Garden of Eden. We read in Genesis 3 that after Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were punished, He provided them with clothing made of animal skins. This would of course have required the death of an animal.

In the next chapter, we read about the sacrifices made by Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve.

Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering (Genesis 4:4).

However, Cain brought fruit or grain which he had grown, and this was not acceptable to God. The need for animals to be sacrificed, here a sheep or goat, was established already.

Moving forward to the time of Abraham, a faithful man living in about 2000 BC, we find that this was still the case. He and his son Isaac were going to make a sacrifice, when they had this conversation:

Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” Then he said, “Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” And Abraham said, “My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” So the two of them went together (Genesis 22:7–8).

It was very clear to both of them that a lamb was the expected sacrifice when approaching God.

This was also the case at the Passover, when God would free His people from slavery in Egypt. The people were to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts of their house – a very graphic display of obedience.

On the tenth of this [the first] month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for the lamb, let him and his neighbour next to his house take it according to the number of the persons; according to each man's need you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first



year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats (Exodus 12:3–5).

Along with other sacrifices, keeping the Passover was enshrined in the Law of Moses, given by God shortly afterwards, by which Israel were to live until Jesus came. In particular, we find that the offerings for forgiveness of sins (disobedience to God) were often lambs – see Leviticus chapters 3–5.

These practices were the background to John's comments when he met Jesus.

Fulfilled in Jesus

Jesus' death as a sacrifice was described even before he was born, through the prophets of Israel. Speaking of Jesus' death, Isaiah prophesied:

He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth (Isaiah 53:7).

When Jesus came, he spent about 3½ years of his adult life preaching and teaching, and then was crucified. Yet that apparently ignominious end was actually in the plan of God. For men and women to be reconciled to Him, a sacrifice was needed.

And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission [of sins] (Hebrews 9:22).

Jesus was a perfect, sinless man, who did not deserve to die. Yet he willingly submitted to the will of his Father and offered his life as that perfect sacrifice. In doing so, he represented each of us, allowing us to be reconciled to God, if we choose to accept his work on our behalf.

Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (1 Peter 1:18–19).

This demonstrates the remarkable love of God, and of the Lord Jesus, in going to such great lengths to ensure that men and women like us can have a relationship with them and hope to live for ever in God's kingdom.

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation [atonement] for our sins (1 John 4:9–10).

Editor