

“Behold, the Lamb of God, Who Takes Away the Sin of the World.”

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On March 23, 2008, Easter, Christians brought to a close their remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Beginning on the evening of April 19 the festival of Passover will be celebrated by our Jewish friends and neighbors. Passover (*Pesach* in Hebrew) has its origin at the time of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. These two events are joined together in history because Jesus used the occasion of the Passover feast to command His disciples to remember His death through observing the Lord's Supper. These events are not only joined together in history, but also in their significance.

The central element of the Passover was the lamb whose blood shielded the household from the Angel of Death. The only way to escape the terrible plague of the death of the firstborn was to sprinkle the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorposts of the house. Yet, Passover was but one part of the whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament. When we look at the broader scope of all the sacrifices we see that the sacrificial animal (often, but not always a lamb) was meant to be a symbol of the way that God would forgive sins. The blood of the animal, which symbolized its life, would be shed to make atonement for sin. There are two key Scriptures which teach this truth. The first is Leviticus 17:11. God said, *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.”* The second is Hebrews 9:22, *“Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”*

What is atonement? Perhaps it is best to explain two important truths that the Bible teaches about the nature of an atoning sacrifice? First, the sacrifice is a substitute. The animal takes the place of the person who has sinned against God. The Bible teaches that *“...the wages of sin is death...”* (Romans 6:23) Yet, instead of the sinner being immediately judged by God, the sinner could bring a substitute that would take his place. The lamb is the substitute. The second element of atonement is that the sacrifice is offered to satisfy the demands of God's justice. A holy and righteous God has been offended by our sin. We might think that God would just indulge us a little; that He would wink at our “mistake” and let us off the hook. But, of course, if He did that, He would not be a righteous judge. No, the demands of Divine justice must be met and satisfied. Only then can the offense of sin be forgiven. When the sacrifice is made, and the life of the lamb is given for the life of the sinner, then Justice has been satisfied. Or...maybe not.

Here is the inherent weakness of the Old Testament system of sacrifices. The animal that is sacrificed can symbolize atonement, but an animal cannot really be a substitute for a human being. Hebrews 10:1, 4 reminds us, *“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near...For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”* The sacrifice of the lamb was just a shadow of a reality that would come.

At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, John the Baptizer announced the reality of which the law was a shadow. He said, *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29) Isn't it interesting that Jesus is introduced with words that point to His own sacrifice on the cross of Calvary? John is introducing Him as the One who would make a true atonement for sin. In some circles it is popular to claim that Jesus really had no awareness of the path his life would take. He was an accidental victim of the religious establishment. Yet, the Scripture makes it clear that Jesus fully understood His mission. Toward the end of His earthly ministry He said to His disciples, *"See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."* (Matthew 20:18-9) Did Jesus lack self-awareness? Was He clueless about the events that swirled around Him? Not at all. All through His teaching He made the claim that He was the Son of God, and that through Him sinners would find forgiveness of sins.

What did Jesus actually accomplish as the Lamb of God? He was the One who fulfilled the meaning of the sacrifices of the Old Testament. So, just as the lamb was a substitute for the sinner, Jesus took to Himself the guilt of our transgressions and was judged in our place. Also, just as the sacrifice of the lamb satisfied the justice of God, so, too, the death of Jesus satisfied the demands of justice. Isaiah captured this point perfectly when he wrote: *"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."* (Isaiah 53:4-6)

There is one final image of the Lamb of God that we find in Scripture. Jesus, who died for us, did not remain in the power of death. On the third day He arose from the grave. Forty days later He ascended to heaven. Many years after these events, the aged apostle, John, was given a vision of things to come. The book of Revelation contains this vision. In chapter 4, John is allowed to see into the very throne room of heaven. There he saw One who was seated on a throne. The One on the throne is worshipped by the hosts of heaven; men and angels. Then the scene shifts and John's attention is drawn to another One. This time the One that John sees is like a Lamb "as though it had been slain." (Revelation 5:6) Songs of worship are sung to the Lamb; songs that recall what Jesus accomplished on Calvary's cross; songs that proclaim His worthiness. The first song: *"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'"* The second song: *"'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!'"* (Revelation 5:9-10, 12)

From the time of the first Passover in Egypt to that great day when Heaven rings with the praises of the Lord Jesus, all Scripture points us to the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, as the only hope that we have for the forgiveness of our sins; victory over death and the glory of life eternal.

The Scripture is clear. Now the only question that remains is this, "Do I believe what the Bible teaches?" Take this question seriously for, as Peter said, "*...there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" (Acts 4:12)