Jesus – the Lamb of God

1. Introduction

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

a. John the Baptist appears at the beginning of John's Gospel (and the other Gospels) and then disappears into the background because he is a link, or a bridge, between the Old Testament and the New Testament. He is prominent at the beginning of the Gospel because he is part of the roots of the Gospel. The roots of Jesus go back to eternity (John 1:1), and as we have seen are there throughout the Old Testament.

b. Over and over we will see in this Gospel that John, the writer, explains Jesus in terms of the Old Testament. Jesus doesn't appear on the scene of history without historical preparation. God had been at work in Israel for two thousand years, and even before that, putting in place a historical backdrop that would make Jesus' life and ministry more intelligible.

c. John the Baptist is a link between the Old Testament and the New Testament. He of the nature of the Old Testament as a prophet like Elijah but he is also voice crying that the long-expected Messiah has come. In a sense he is actually the last Old Testament prophet but he is living in the fulfilment of his prophesy.

2. John's testimony of Jesus

a. One of the purposes of John the Baptist's ministry is to make sure he is not confused with Jesus. As the Synoptics reveal, John's ministry was so influential that the Jewish religious authorities investigated him (Matthew 3:5-6). In John 1 a delegation of priests and Levites is sent, probably from the Sanhedrin, to question John. The priests were descendants of Aaron who took the leadership in matters of theological and practical orthodoxy, including ritual purity. They were concerned about this man out in the wilderness baptising people and wanted to know by what authority he was operating. When questioned by the priests and Levites he is explicit in his declaration.

John 1:19-23 *And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"* ***20*** *He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."* ***21*** *And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."* ***22*** *So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"* ***23*** *He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord', as the prophet Isaiah said."*

b. The leaders asked John if he was Elijah because messianic expectation was high then due to Daniel's prediction that dated the appearance of Messiah at that time (Daniel 9:25). Malachi had predicted that Elijah would return to herald the day of the Lord that Messiah would inaugurate (Malachi 4:5-6). Popularly it was believed that Elijah would anoint the Messiah, and thereby reveal his identity to him and to Israel. When John the Baptist denied being Elijah, he was denying being Elijah himself. His dress, diet, lifestyle, and ministry, however, were very similar to Elijah's.

c. The prophet whom the leaders had in mind when they asked their third question was the prophet that Moses had predicted would come (Deuteronomy 18:15-18). This prophet would bring new revelation from God and might lead the Israelites in a new Exodus and overcome their oppressors. The Jews incorrectly failed to identify this prophet with Messiah

(cf. John 7:40-41). In contrast, the earliest Christian preachers contended that "the prophet" was identical with the Messiah (cf. Acts 3:22). John the Baptist claimed that he was not that long-expected prophet any more than he was the Messiah or Elijah.

d. The quote from Isaiah comes from the Is.40:3-5 and, as we have mentioned before, would have signposted his Jewish hearers to that passage and taken the focus off of John's identity and instead point to the one who he was preparing the way for.

Is.40:3-5 *A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. **4** Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. **5** And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

e. In other words, in Isaiah "the Lord" refers to Yahweh, Jehovah, the God who is the Creator and Ruler of the world, and the Covenant God of Israel. John the Baptist identifies himself as that voice crying in the wilderness, and the Lord whose way he is preparing is Jesus Christ. That's his first witness in these verses. The man coming after him is more than anyone ever dreamed. He is the God of the Old Testament—only now he is man as well as God.

f. When they ask John the Baptist why he is baptizing, he answers simply by saying the one I am preparing for is so superior to me that I am not worthy to untie his sandals. So his second witness is that his baptism is not about himself. It's about Jesus, and he is infinitely superior to John.

John 1:25-27 *They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" **26** John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, **27** even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."*

g. Thirdly John the Baptist declares the main reason that Jesus, the Lord of glory, has come to earth.

John 1:29-30 *The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him, and said, "<u>Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!</u> **30** This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'*

h. Verse 30 repeats verse 15: "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'" The point is that John is emphasizing Jesus' superiority. Jesus is from eternity. "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1). And the reason for saying it here is that John wants to underline what it takes for Jesus to be "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."

i. No ordinary human being can be "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." Everything he has told us is essential to Jesus being the sin-removing Lamb of God. Jesus is the Lord God of Isaiah 40. Jesus is so infinitely superior to John that John isn't worthy to untie his sandals. Jesus is absolutely before John and therefore ranks infinitely above him. And because of all this, he can be "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."

3. The Lamb of God

a. Verse 29 is the highpoint of John's testimony: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" He repeats it in verses 35–36:

John 1:35-36 *The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!'"*

b. This testimony caused the two disciples of John the Baptist to leave him and become followers of Jesus. That is what John's witness is supposed to do. That is why he is saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." He wants people to leave him and follow the Lamb (see Revelation 14:4).

c. This is John's ultimate proclamation to who Jesus is: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." All the other superlatives show what it takes for Jesus to be the Lamb of God who can take away the sin of the world. So John warns us against thinking that any mere man can take away the sin of the world. What Jesus had to do to take away the sin of the world required that he be more than a man. He was the Lord God of Isaiah 40. He was so great that the great John the Baptist was not worthy to untie his sandals. And he was absolutely before John in time and rank.

d. In other words, Jesus was able to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world because he was the God-man. The Word became flesh (1:14). And now we see the central reason why: to take away the sin of the world.

e. When the apostle John wrote his first letter, he put it like this:

1 John 3:5 *You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin."*

f. The reason why the Son of God appeared—the reason the Word became flesh—was to take away sin. John is witnessing to the central reason for the incarnation.

g. Why did John add in 1 John 3:5, "And in him there was no sin"? Because the lambs that were offered in sacrifice to take away sin in the Old Testament had to be spotless, without blemish as the law demanded. Here again, John is referencing back to the Old Testament law with which his hearers would be familiar.

Lev.4:32–35 *If he brings a lamb as his offering for a sin offering, he shall bring a female without blemish and lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill it for a sin offering in the place where they kill the burnt offering. Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. . . . And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.*

h. The sacrifice of lambs played a very important role in the Jewish religious life and sacrificial system. When John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), the Jews who heard him might have immediately thought of any one of several important sacrifices.

i. With the time of the Passover feast being very near, the first thought might be the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. The Passover feast was one of the main Jewish holidays and a celebration in remembrance of God's deliverance of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. In fact, the slaying of the Passover lamb and the applying of the blood to doorposts of the houses (Exodus 12:11-13) is a beautiful picture of Christ's atoning work on the cross. Those for whom He died are covered by His blood, protecting us from the angel of (spiritual) death.

j. Another important sacrifice involving lambs was the daily sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem. Every morning and evening, a lamb was sacrificed in the temple for the sins of the people (Exodus 29:38-42). These daily sacrifices, like all others, were simply to point people towards the perfect sacrifice of Christ on the cross. In fact, the time of Jesus' death on the cross corresponds to the time the evening sacrifice was being made in the temple.

However, we know that the blood of animals could not really take away sin. That whole system was pointing forward to what would happen someday in a final sacrifice for sin.

Heb. 10:4 *For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

k. The Jews at that time would have also been familiar with the Old Testament prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, who foretold the coming of One who would be brought "like a lamb led to the slaughter" (Jeremiah 11:19; Isaiah 53:7) and whose sufferings and sacrifice would provide redemption for Israel. Of course, that person was none other than Jesus Christ, "the Lamb of God."

l. While the idea of a sacrificial system might seem strange to us today, the concept of payment or restitution is still one we can easily understand. We know that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23) and that our sin separates us from God. We also know the Bible teaches we are all sinners and none of us is righteous before God (Romans 3:23). Because of our sin, we are separated from God, and we stand guilty before Him. Therefore, the only hope we can have is if He provides a way for us to be reconciled to Himself, and that is what He did in sending His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross. Christ died to make atonement for sin and to pay the penalty of the sins of all who believe in Him.

m. John is saying: It's happening now. God is sending his own Lamb into the world to take away sin, once and for all. He is the Lamb of God, the Lamb from God, the Lamb provided by God, the Lamb who is God!!!

4. The Lamb without sin

a. When Peter, another eyewitness, described how Christ ransomed us, this is the language he used.

1 Peter 1:18–20 *You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot"*

b. How could Jesus be without sin? Every person born in the ordinary way inherited Adam's sin. That's why Paul said, *"Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned"* (Rom. 5:12). Every man born in the ordinary way is a sinner. And sinners can't take away the sins of sinners.

c. However, Jesus was not born in the ordinary way. He was not born of two humans. He was the God-man because God ordained that the way the Word would become flesh would be through a virgin birth.

Luke 1:35 *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.*

d. Jesus was holy. He was without sin. No original sin. And no active sin in his own behaviour. Jesus asks in John 8:46, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" The answer was, no one has ever been able to convict Jesus of sin. "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth" (1 Peter 2:22; cf. Hebrews 4:15; Romans 8:3).

e. And the reason he was without sin is that he was God. In the beginning was the Word and the word was with God and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh (John 1:1, 14). Everything about Jesus in this Gospel shows how he could be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

5. The slaughtered Lamb for the whole world

a. John's description of Jesus was shocking news to the Jews. This man who was God would die! Not just die but be slaughtered like a lamb. Secondly, he declares that the whole world would benefit from this and not just Jews. This God-man was the Jewish Messiah (see John 1:41). But his death would take away the sin of the world, not just the sin of Israel.

b. Those two truths—death and worldwide sin-bearing—are summed up together by Caiaphas speaking prophetically at the Jewish Council.

John 11:49-52 *But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all.* ***50*** *Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."* ***51*** *He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation,* ***52*** *and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.*

c. He would die for Jews but not just for Jews, but for people scattered all over the world. John put it like this in his first letter:

1 John 2:2 *He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world*

d. The word propitiation carries the basic idea of appeasement or satisfaction, specifically toward God. Propitiation is a two-part act that involves appeasing the wrath of an offended person and being reconciled to him.

e. The necessity of appeasing God is something many religions have in common. In ancient pagan religions, as well as in many religions today, the idea is taught that man appeases God by offering various gifts or sacrifices. However, the Bible teaches that God Himself has provided the only means through which His wrath can be appeased and sinful man can be reconciled to Him.

f. In the New Testament, the act of propitiation always refers to the work of God and not the sacrifices or gifts offered by man. The reason for this is that man is totally incapable of satisfying God's justice except by spending eternity in hell. There is no service, sacrifice, or gift that man can offer that will appease the holy wrath of God or satisfy His perfect justice.

g. The only satisfaction, or propitiation, that could be acceptable to God and that could reconcile man to Him had to be made by God. For this reason, God the Son, Jesus Christ, came into the world in human flesh to be the perfect sacrifice for sin and make atonement or "propitiation for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17). The Lamb takes away sin and removes God's wrath just as the blood over the doorposts saved the people from the wrath poured out over Egypt. Not just for Jews but for Gentiles scattered among all nations.

h. In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul makes the argument that everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, is under the condemnation of God and deserving of His wrath (Romans 1:18). Everyone has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). All of us deserve His wrath and punishment. God in His infinite grace and mercy has provided a way that His wrath can be appeased and we can be reconciled to Him.

i. That way is through the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus Christ, as the payment for sins. It is through faith in Jesus Christ as God's perfect sacrifice that we can be reconciled to God. It is only because of Christ's death on the cross and His resurrection on the third day that a lost sinner deserving of hell can be reconciled to a holy God. The wonderful truth of the gospel is

that Christians are saved from God's wrath and reconciled to God not because "we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

Rev. 5:9 *By your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe*

j. Propitiation, the removal of God's wrath by taking away our sin, is offered to the whole world. However, scripture makes it clear that this offer is conditional.

John 3:36 *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*

k. This means that when John says, *"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,"* he doesn't mean that every person in the world is saved. He means every person in the world—Jew or Gentile—will be saved if they believe in Jesus and follow him. If they believe, their sin has been taken away by the Lamb. If they believe, God's wrath has been removed by the Lamb.

l. There is no race, no nationality, no ethnicity, no socio-economic status excluded. To as many as receive him, who believe on his name (John 1:12), their sins are taken away (John 1:29; 1 John 3:5) and the wrath of God is removed (John 3:36; 1 John 2:2) and they are made the children of God (John 1:12) and given eternal life (John 3:16).

m. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). The only way for God's wrath against sinful man to be appeased and for us to be reconciled to God is through Jesus Christ. There is no other way.

6. Conclusion

a. An important part of Christ's saving work is deliverance from God's wrath; Jesus' propitiation on the cross is the only thing that can turn away God's divine condemnation of sin. Those who reject Christ as their Saviour and refuse to believe in Him have no hope of salvation. They can only look forward to facing the wrath of God that they have stored up for the coming day of judgment (Romans 2:5). There is no other propitiation or sacrifice that can be made for their sins.

b. It is through His death on the cross as God's perfect sacrifice for sin and His resurrection three days later that we can now have eternal life if we believe in Him. The fact that God Himself has provided the offering that atones for our sin is part of the glorious good news of the gospel.

1 Peter 1:18-21 *….knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, **19** but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. **20** He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you **21** who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.*