“LOOK, THE LAMB OF GOD!”

John 1:29–34

Key Verse: 1:29

“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”

Have you ever been around someone who has no clue that they’ve done wrong? Or someone who gets upset when they make just a small mistake? On one hand, we might have no awareness of our sin, or on the other, a heightened awareness of it that leaves us devastated. In order to feel better, people try to explain away guilt as something that’s socially conditioned. Some resent the church for manipulating people by playing on their guilt. They try to deny that there’s any such thing as sin, that we should all just be “doing what comes naturally.” But in real life, wrongdoing occurs all the time, right? Lying. Stealing. Hurting others. They come natural to us, but people everywhere would agree these things are wrong. So it’s obvious there’s something in our human condition that makes us prone to sin. But generally, people don’t take sin seriously enough. What is sin, really? If we don’t get it, today’s passage won’t really matter to us. And then there’s the whole question of what to do after we’ve sinned. We try to make up for it. We say sorry, try to do good, try harder. But the underlying guilt doesn’t go away, and so often, the sin comes right back. Religions try to help people deal with sin and guilt with rules, rituals and rites, or with meditation. But in today’s passage we see that only Jesus truly solves this problem. But how? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Look at verse 29. It starts with “The next day.” The “first day” refers to verse 19, when investigators came to check up on John the Baptist. Now it’s “the next day.” In verses 35 and 43 the author repeatedly begins with this phrase, “The next day.” And then in 2:1 he begins, “On the third day.” It’s confusing because he’s listed five consecutive days. The first two are about the ministry of John the Baptist, and the next three are about the opening ministry of Jesus. So to clarify, today we’re covering a second day in John the Baptist’s ministry.

Read verses 29–31. Why is John so excited and exclaiming? It’s because he’s never met Jesus in person before; it’s the first time he’s actually seen him. He knows Jesus is far greater than he himself, that Jesus who “was before him” is God. In fact, he says the whole purpose of his ministry was to help Jesus be revealed to Israel. Jesus is the one they’ve all been waiting for, for so long. So if he’s never met him before, how did John recognize Jesus? Read verses 32–34. It’s when the Spirit came down from heaven as a dove and remained on him. John says God told him beforehand that seeing such an unusual sign would let him know he was encountering God’s Chosen One. We’ll come back to think about some of this later.

But for now, let’s think about the first thing John says about Jesus. Read verse 29 again. This is a very big verse in the Bible. It summarizes a lot of what the Bible tells us about Jesus. It’s at the core of Christianity. Who is Jesus? He’s the Lamb of God. What did he come to do? He came to take away the sin of the world. What a huge mission! It seems impossible, harder than getting rid of racism, or selfishness, or hate. It’s interesting that John the Baptist is the one who said this. He’d been baptizing people in the Jordan River, helping them to repent of their sins. But he knew his water baptism was only a ritual; it couldn’t really touch the sin in people’s souls. But Jesus had come to actually take away the sins of the world. To John, that’s the greatest news ever—something to shout about! It’s also interesting that in the previous passage, John had identified himself in terms of his mission. He was a voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Make straight the way for the Lord.” Now he also identifies Jesus in terms of *his* mission. Jesus is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world.

So what does this mean? To really understand it, we have to look back at the Old Testament. In it we see how God taught his people to sacrifice lambs. Lambs were offered at the temple every morning and evening, as a sin offering and for the purification of priests. New mothers had to offer a lamb. Lambs were offered at the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. But especially, lambs were offered every year at Passover.

It was to commemorate the night when God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. After living there as slaves for 430 years the Bible says the people were groaning under their cruel bondage (Ex2:23,24; 6:5). God sent Moses to challenge Pharaoh king of Egypt to let his people go. God brought nine terrible plagues on the land, but each time, Pharaoh changed his mind, hardened his heart and refused to let the people go. Finally God sent the angel of death to strike down all the firstborn in Egypt. God told each Israelite family to sacrifice a lamb, put the lamb’s blood on the doorpost of their houses, and if they did, the angel of death would pass over them. That night not only were their firstborns spared, but also, at long last, they finally got to get out of Egypt. The blood of the lamb set them free from their slavery! Yay! Their slavery is a metaphor for our universal slavery to sin. Sin demeans us and makes us miserable. Sin makes us helpless and fatalistic. Pharaoh is a metaphor for Satan. He’s the one who holds us in bondage to our sin and never wants to let us go. And the Passover lamb looked forward to the coming of Jesus. It’s only his blood that can take away our sins and really set us free.

Verse 29 doesn’t literally mention blood, but as the Lamb of God, his blood is the key. John the author explains it in his first letter. He writes, “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin” (1Jn1:5b–7). Walking in the light means letting God’s light expose our sins and show us how wrong they are. His blood is key to fellowship with God and with one another. John says he writes to keep us from sinning, but if we do sin, he says Jesus is our “advocate” with the Father and “the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1Jn2:1,2). John also wrote the Book of Revelation, where he repeatedly describes Jesus as “the Lamb” and proclaims that his blood makes us belong to God, frees us from our sins, purifies us and gives us victory (1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11).

But we may wonder, “Why blood?” Why did Jesus have to shed his blood in order to take away our sins? Why can’t God just forgive us? It speaks to the fundamental nature of God. God is love, and at the same time, he’s holy and just. God really wants to forgive our sins and save us because he loves us so much. But he could not do that without his holiness and justice also being satisfied (cf. Ro3:25,26). In God’s eyes, sin cannot be ignored, covered up or condoned. Sin has to be dealt with justly. How? To God, when sin is committed, it’s never a light matter; it actually demands the death penalty. It may seem harsh to us, but it has to do with the absolute purity and justice of God. God hates sin that much. If that’s the case, how could God possibly save sinful human beings or be with us? It’s by the shedding of blood. He explained in Leviticus 17:11: “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” God was explaining why he didn’t want his people to eat or drink blood. He wanted them to take the shedding of blood very seriously. He wanted them to consider it a most holy thing to sprinkle blood on the altar to atone for their sins. Hebrews 9:22 explains, “In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

But shedding blood in the Old Testament temple was only a shadow of what Jesus would do. What’s essential about Jesus being the Lamb of God is that he was sinless. John writes in his letter: “But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin” (1Jn3:5). Because Jesus alone was conceived by the Holy Spirit, he didn’t inherit a sinful nature the way we do at birth. Jesus was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Heb4:15b). Like a lamb without blemish or defect, Jesus was sinless. And when his blood was shed, that alone, in God’s sight, was the just payment for our sins. Only his blood can satisfy God’s justice and bring us God’s forgiveness. Romans 3:25a says, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.” Our sins take us far away from God, but the blood of Jesus draws us close to him (Eph2:13). Our sins make us full of guilt and unable to serve God, but the blood of Jesus cleanses our guilty conscience (Heb9:14). Our sins keep us hiding in the darkness, but by faith in the blood of Jesus we can come into God’s light (1Jn1:7).

Jesus the Lamb of God not only shed his blood but also took all the punishment our sins deserve. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” When he was crucified on the cross, Jesus bore all the wrath of God for all our sins. Isaiah 53:4–7 says, “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” It was a prophecy of the coming of a suffering servant; it was a mystery who it was talking about. But the Apostle Peter through the Holy Spirit was convinced it applied specifically to Jesus. He wrote, quoting Isaiah 53, “‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed’” (1Pe2:22–24).

So John exclaims, “Look!” “Look, the Lamb of God!” What does he mean? Of course he was telling people there with him to literally look at Jesus. But in a deeper sense, he’s calling all of us to look at Jesus the Lamb of God. It’s quite uncomfortable to look at him, actually; we’d rather not. It’s not just because it was gory and grotesque; it was because our sins did that; our sins caused him to suffer and die like that. Of course we can’t see him physically, but we need to look at him in faith. We need to receive what he did for us by faith. We need to look at his blood being shed for our sins. We need to look at his pierced body, his suffering, his total self-sacrifice on our behalf. And as we do, he melts all our pride and our sin-hardened hearts. We find peace with God. We find new hope for healing and forgiveness. We find new strength to live for God. If we’ve been wounded by our sins, by events or by others, we find healing. As we look at Jesus the Lamb of God, we begin to see sin the way God does. As we keep looking at Jesus the Lamb of God, he transforms our character. In our sinful nature we’re rebellious like goats. But as we look at him, Jesus the Lamb of God becomes our example. His gentle, humble submission to the Father becomes ours. His willingness to suffer to save others becomes ours.

In verse 35b John says that Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. It means he changes us from within. Water baptism and lamb’s blood being shed were outward rituals that didn’t change anybody. But when we repent and look at Jesus the Lamb of God, he gives us the Holy Spirit, the power to change. Let’s read verse 29 again. May God open our hearts to really look at him.