

The Best News in the World

John 1:35-51

An Awkward Introduction

This is a charming story of three friends who found Jesus and then introduced other friends to Him. It is also an awkward story of some ordinary guys who do not know what to do around a possible celebrity.

Andrew and his friend were with John. If we had read from the beginning of the chapter, we would have seen that this is John the Baptist – the prophet who was sent by God to prepare people to receive the Son of God when He came. Andrew and his friend were disciples of John. A disciple is a learner – someone who follows a master to learn from him. John’s mission was to prepare people to receive the Son of God, so apparently Andrew and his friend were spiritually receptive. Then as a man passes by, John says, “Behold, the Lamb of God.” Now that is a strange thing to say. Have you ever met someone named “Lamb of God?” Andrew had not, either. But Andrew and his friend were intrigued, so they started following this guy. Have you ever started following a complete stranger, even if he is called the Lamb of God? Me neither. Then this Lamb guy asked them what they wanted. Sure, I would too, if a couple of guys started following me around. So what was so important that they followed him? They said, “Where are you staying?” What a dumb question! What does it matter where he is staying? This question is almost as bad as the ones sports reporters ask the winning captain of the team – “How does it feel to win this big game?” What do you think? It feels great! So far we are deep into a very awkward situation.

Why did Andrew ask such an awkward question? Who did they think they were following? Before they actually started, Andrew grabbed his brother Cephas, later named Peter. What Andrew said to Peter is revealing. Andrew told Peter, “We have found the Messiah!” So apparently Andrew knew enough from John and from the Bible to realize that the Lamb of God must be another name for the Messiah. And if this Lamb guy – who turns out to be Jesus – is really the Messiah, that is a very big deal. Big enough to make any normal person lose his composure and become very awkward.

The Messiah

The Jewish people had been looking for the Messiah for a long time – for hundreds of years. Four hundred years before this event, prophets had been announcing that a savior would come. This was when Israel was a prosperous nation – prosperous, but increasingly wicked. At that time most people were not interested in a savior, but some were. The poor were cruelly oppressed, and the righteous were tormented by the sin around them. These people longed for a savior to restore Israel to the greatness it enjoyed under their great kings David and Solomon. Then disaster struck! Israel was conquered by a brutal king, and her people were carried far off into captivity in a distant land. Now the message of a savior was more welcome! Seventy years later some Israelites were able to return home, but they were still under the rule of a distant king. By the time of John the Baptist and Andrew, the Roman armies had occupied the land of Israel and cruelly suppressed any opposition to their rule. Jews longed for freedom from Rome, and for a righteous king like David. They wanted the Messiah to come and save them from their oppressors.

Four hundred years! For four hundred years every father and mother taught their children, every preacher and teacher reminded the people of God’s promise – the promise of the Messiah to come, who would save his people. So it is not surprising that Andrew and his friend would be in awe of this man – it he was indeed the Messiah. What is more intriguing is what they might have thought of the Lamb of God.

Three Lambs

Lamb of God is a strange name for us, but the concept was not a new one for the Jews. They knew what the Lamb of God was, and it was not a man. It was a wooly animal. In fact, there were three Lambs of God, and they are all mentioned in the Old Testament.

First there is the Passover Lamb. This lamb is introduced in the book of Exodus, chapter 12, on the night when the nation of Israel escaped from Egypt. God sent Moses to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to demand the release of God's people whom Pharaoh had enslaved. When Pharaoh refused, God sent nine terrible plagues on the nation to persuade him. Even though the nation was in ruins, Pharaoh still refused to free God's people, so God sent one last plague. God was going to send His angel to kill the oldest male in every household in Egypt. But God was going to pass over the homes of His own people of Israel. The death angel would know where the Israelites lived because God told them to kill a lamb and put its blood on the door posts of their houses. That night God's angel swept through Egypt and killed Pharaoh's oldest boy, and the oldest boy in every family – except for anyone who had the blood of a lamb on his door post. In grief and fear Pharaoh finally set free the people of Israel.

God instructed the people of Israel to remember this great deliverance every year. Each year they gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. According to God's instructions, each family killed a lamb and ate it in the Passover meal. In this way they celebrated their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. The blood of the lamb had been their protection from the death angel. An innocent lamb had to die in order for the people of Israel to escape from Pharaoh. The Passover Lamb was the sacrifice that set God's people free.

The second lamb is the sin offering. This is described in the book of Leviticus 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...and the priest shall burn it on the altar, on top of the LORD's food offerings. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven. (Leviticus 4:32-35)

The purpose of this sacrifice was to receive forgiveness of sin. No one can approach God who is a sinner. No one can enter God's presence or be part of God's people if he has broken God's law. The problem is that everyone does sin. All of us break God's law. So in ancient times God provided a way for people to be forgiven of their sins so that they could come near to God. They would sacrifice a lamb.

The sinner would bring a perfect lamb to God, one without any flaw. Then he placed his hands on the head of the lamb as a sign that he was transferring his sin to the lamb. Then the lamb, with the sin on her, was killed. The lamb died because of sin, and the sinner went free. The innocent lamb died in the place of the guilty sinner. From then on he was forgiven of that sin. This passage says he received atonement for his sin. The Hebrew word for atonement means to cover. The blood of the lamb covered the sin of the sinner and God no longer saw it. The sin offering lamb was the sacrifice that forgave people of their sins.

The third lamb consecrated the tent of meeting. This is described in the book of Exodus 29:38-39, 42, 44-46.

Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old day by day regularly. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight...It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there...I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God. (Exodus 29:38-39, 42, 44-46)

When God's people left Egypt, God told them to build a magnificent tent in which they could meet

with Him. Inside this tent was an altar for sacrifices. This tent is where the sin offering was made. But first, the tent had to be consecrated, or dedicated for service to God. It was made a holy place so that a holy God could live there. Every day, twice a day, a lamb was slaughtered and offered on the altar. This made the tent a holy place – a place where God could dwell – and God promised “I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.” Later Solomon built a temple as God’s permanent dwelling place, and the twice daily sacrifice was offered there. The consecrating lamb made the temple a holy place suitable for God to live in.

The Lamb of God

Three lambs. Each lamb was sacrificed so that God’s people could worship Him. One lamb freed them from slavery so they could serve God, one forgave their sins so they could approach God, and one purified the temple so they could meet with God. But what does this have to do with the man who passed by John and Andrew? What does this have to do with the Messiah?

Who knows what was going on in Andrew’s mind, but he was a devout Jew. He was spiritually hungry enough to become a disciple of John the Baptist. Andrew was no casual worshiper – the sort of guy who showed up at the temple whenever it was convenient. So surely Andrew knew that God provided for His people to serve Him through the sacrifice of a lamb. Perhaps he thought that Jesus was the consecrating lamb, and would build a better temple in which to worship God. Perhaps he thought that Jesus was the forgiveness lamb, and would show people how to be forgiven of their sins. It is very likely that Andrew thought Jesus was the freedom lamb who would liberate the Jews from Rome. This is the direct connection with the Messiah. The Jews looked for the Messiah to throw off the bondage to Rome just as God had set them free from Egypt long ago. It would make sense that Jesus is the freedom lamb. But as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Andrew and his friends had no idea just how radical this Lamb of God really was.

And as the gospel unfolds, we see that Jesus is in fact all three lambs. Jesus came into a world of sinful people. Everyone in the world has failed to some extent to keep God’s law. God was very clear, right from the beginning – if you break His law, you will die. All of us are born under a death sentence, and each day we add to our crimes against God. It is impossible to do enough good to cancel out the evil in our actions and in our hearts. Everyone is doomed. To all of us sinful people Jesus came as the sin offering. Like the lamb in ancient times, Jesus took upon Himself our sin. With our sin upon Him, Jesus took the penalty for that sin. Jesus died, and when He died, the penalty for our sin was paid. Now we have forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus is the forgiveness Lamb of God.

Jesus came into a world in which everyone – Jews and Romans included – were inescapably locked in slavery to sin. Not only are we guilty of sinful actions, we are unable to do good. Foreign oppression is bad – very bad – and slavery is horrible, but these are temporary miseries. Slavery to sin has eternal consequences. Unless we can get free from the power which sin has over us, we will grow more and more wicked, until at last we die and go to hell. But when we try to turn ourselves around and do good, we find that we have a fascination for evil, and an intense desire to sin. We really do not want to please God. We want to please ourselves – and this is the heart of sin. Day after day we wake up in the morning, scheming and calculating how to please ourselves, and we are willing to hurt others if necessary to get what we want. We might serve God sometimes, but only if it fits into our overall plan for our own life. We are trapped in this slavery to sin. And to such slaves as us, Jesus comes and sets us free. Free to love Him, free to serve God, free from the tyranny of pleasing ourselves, free to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus is the freedom Lamb of God.

Jesus came into a world infested with demons and polluted with sin. God created a good world, but

by the time of Jesus it had become a brutal, nasty place – no place for a holy God. Only in the temple in Jerusalem could you find God’s presence. There, locked behind a dense curtain, in a dark room, God’s fiery presence hovered over the Ark of the Covenant. Once a year the high priest entered bearing the blood of a lamb to sprinkle on the Ark. Jesus is the new great high priest who purified the world and made it possible for us to meet Him anywhere. Jesus has purified us, His people, so that now we no longer need to go to a temple in Jerusalem, but whenever we meet together, God comes and joins us. The thick curtain has been torn open and we meet God everywhere. Jesus is the consecrating Lamb of God.

The Best News in the World

Friends, do you see how wonderful Jesus is? Do you see how dangerous our situation – filthy with sin, trapped in sinful desires, exiled from God’s presence? Do you see that we were helpless, caught like a mouse in the grip of a cat, ready to be eaten alive? Then Jesus came! Jesus saw us, He pitied us, He rescued us. And now everything is so different! We no longer live in fear of punishment for sin, because Jesus took our punishment. We are no longer trapped in sinful desires, but year by year Jesus is replacing those sinful desires with righteous desires. We are no longer exiled from God, but we meet God all day long, every day, whenever we wish to talk with Him. Isn’t this the best thing that has ever happened to you?

Andrew did not have a full understanding of Jesus. He had just met Him! Andrew did not know that Jesus would rescue him and the whole world from the grip of sin. But he could tell that Jesus was chosen by God to do something great in Israel. He could tell that Jesus was the Messiah – chosen by God to save His people. So in spite of the fact that Andrew actually knew very little about Jesus, he did a very awkward thing, a very natural thing. He ran to tell his brother and invite him to come see Jesus.

Sometimes Christians feel awkward about sharing their faith. It is true, sometimes other people behave badly when you talk about Jesus. But many people are actually curious. In spite of the fact that you live in a very religious country, many people actually know little about Jesus Himself. Many of your friends would love to know more about Jesus. But what do you say? There are books and classes on what to say to unbelievers, and these can be helpful. But the most important thing to say is just what Andrew said. “I have found Jesus. Come see Him with me.” And where can they find Jesus? Jesus is present in church and in CUR. Wherever the Bible is read, Jesus is present there. Like Andrew, you can invite your friends to church and to CUR, and you can talk with them about what you heard. You do not have to possess special knowledge. You do not have to remember the three lambs in the Old Testament! Just tell your friends that Jesus rescued you from your sinful behavior and now guides and comforts you. Isn’t this the natural thing to do with the best news in the world?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming to be the Lamb of God for us. Thank you for dying for our sins, releasing us from slavery to sin, and for purifying us so that we might be close to God. We are overwhelmed with your love and goodness to us. This is the best thing that has ever happened to us, but sometimes we find it awkward to share with others. Help us to share this wonderful news with our friends and bring them to meet Jesus so that they also might know this great salvation. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Amen.

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September 6, 2016