

Who is Jesus?

Messages from the Gospel of John

Message 5

The Lamb of God John 1:29-34

What's Wrong with the World?

What is *wrong* with the world? You would have to be insane or living in a cave to think that our world is without problems. We are still reeling from the double disaster of the Katrina and Rita hurricanes, and the full economic effect is not yet evident. This week economists have begun talking about a recession. Then there is the threat posed by the new super-germs which are impervious to all current antibiotics. Health officials are speculating about a possible epidemic soon. But our most distressing problems are the ones we bring upon ourselves. Hardly a day passes without news of terrorist attacks, soldiers dying in Iraq, and the danger of rogue nations obtaining nuclear weapons. Did you read last week that Israel notified our government that Iran cannot be allowed to develop nuclear capability – and if necessary Israel will act unilaterally to destroy the Iranian nuclear program? Such a move could engulf the whole Middle East in the greatest war ever.

What is wrong with the world? Karl Marx said the problem was economic imbalance. He traced the world's problems to capitalists controlling the wealth and impoverishing the workers. His remedy was for the workers to own the means of production. Sounds good on paper, but after the slaughter of millions under communist regimes which grew poorer by the decade, no one believes the communist vision anymore. Sigmund Freud said the problem was psychological repression, and his work spawned a whole industry of psycho-therapy. In this worldview sin does not exist, and good behavior will result from coming to terms with our unconscious. Now there is increasing discussion of ours as a “therapeutic society”, where no one is responsible for his acts and the role of government is to soothe us into virtue. Centuries before Marx or Freud, Mohammed said the problem with the world was false religion. Islam was his answer – submission to God, by force if necessary. This religion has unleashed much of the current wave of violence. Islam does admit to the existence of sin, but its remedy is enforced virtue. In an Islamic society people may not be any more virtuous, but they will be required to live virtuously by the power of the state. Obviously freedom will be severely limited in such a society.

What is wrong with the world? Sin is the problem. Economic imbalance, psychological repression, and false religion are problems, but they are merely symptomatic of a deeper, root problem. Man himself is flawed – and until man is fixed, all the solutions in the world will be merely band-aids on a cancer. Only if sin can be removed is there any real hope for this world. Today we read that Jesus is that hope. Jesus came to take away the sins of the world.

This semester we are studying John's gospel to get a clear picture of who Jesus really is. So far we have seen that Jesus is the Logos, the divine Speech which created and rules the world. Jesus is the Life. He is the only being who possesses life intrinsically, and He gives it to us for a time. Jesus is the Light. Just as the earth began in darkness until God created light, so this world was spiritually dark until Jesus came. With His coming and the spread of the church, idolatry and oppression have been on the retreat everywhere. Notice that every one of these titles for Jesus is universal in scope. All the gospels show that Jesus came for people of all nations and ethnicities, but John is unique in the degree to which He focuses our attention on the whole world. Now we see that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The Lamb of God

But why a lamb? Wouldn't we expect that the savior of mankind would come with power and glory to deliver His people from their enemies? Yes, and that is what the Jews in Jesus' day expected. If they had chosen an animal to represent their Christ, it might have been the eagle. God used the eagle in Deuteronomy as a symbol of His care for Israel.

For the LORD's portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land And in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, Hovers over its young, Spreading out its wings, taking them up, Carrying them on its wings. (Deuteronomy 32:9-11)

In Jeremiah God is an eagle who swoops down on Israel's enemies and destroys them.

Behold, He shall come up and fly like the eagle,
And spread His wings over Bozrah;
The heart of the mighty men of Edom in that day shall be
Like the heart of a woman in birth pangs. (Jeremiah 49:22)

Or the Jews might have thought of God as a great delivering lion. There are many examples of this imagery in the Bible. Isaiah 31:4 is representative.

For thus the LORD has spoken to me:
"As a lion roars, And a young lion over his prey
...
So the LORD of hosts will come down
To fight for Mount Zion and for its hill."

Ezekiel contains complex visions of God, which incorporate the images of both the eagle and lion, as well as a man and an ox. These four images are recapitulated in the Revelation (chapter 4) as the four living creatures that bow before the throne of God. Then in the next chapter of Revelation Jesus is presented as the Lion. But listen to the sort of lion He is.

But one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals." And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain,... (Revelation 5:5-6)

Isn't that intriguing? No one in heaven or in earth was able to open the scroll and read God's word, except Jesus. The elder introduced Jesus as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, but when John looked at Jesus, what he saw was a lamb! Furthermore, Jesus was a lamb that looked like it had been killed – a dead lamb.

When we return to the Old Testament, we find lambs everywhere, but not as an image for God. I found 158 references to lambs – all but one of them referring to domesticated ruminants. Of interest to us are the references to lambs as sacrificial animals – and here there are three major categories. First is the daily sacrifice. Let's read Exodus 29:38-39, 42-46.

Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs of the first year, day by day continually. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight. ...This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of meeting

before the LORD, where I will meet you to speak with you. And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by My glory. So I will consecrate the tabernacle of meeting and the altar. I will also consecrate both Aaron and his sons to minister to Me as priests. I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them. I am the LORD their God. (Exodus 29:38-39, 42-46)

The daily sacrifice required two lambs, and its purpose was to consecrate the tabernacle, and later the temple. By the sacrifice of these lambs, the tabernacle was kept holy and God would remain with Israel. The promise and goal of the covenant was always that God would take His people as His own and live among them. The daily sacrifice enabled that to happen.

The second sort of lamb sacrifice was the sin offering. This is described in Leviticus 4:32-35.

If he brings a lamb as his sin offering, he shall bring a female without blemish. Then he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering, and kill it as a sin offering at the place where they kill the burnt offering...Then the priest shall burn it on the altar, according to the offerings made by fire to the LORD. So the priest shall make atonement for his sin that he has committed, and it shall be forgiven him. (Leviticus 4:32-35)

The purpose of this sacrifice was to receive forgiveness of sin. 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. 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 third sort of lamb sacrifice may be the most familiar. This was the festival of Passover, when the Jews celebrated their deliverance from Egypt. The institution of this festival is described in the book of Exodus, chapter 12. God was planning to kill the firstborn male in every household in Egypt because Pharaoh had refused to let Israel worship God. Even after God sent nine terrible plagues on Egypt, Pharaoh still refused to let Israel go. God was coming to kill every firstborn male in the land, but He made a way for Israel to escape. Each Israelite family killed a lamb and smeared its blood on the doorposts of their house. That night God passed over those doors with the lamb's blood, but entered all the other houses and killed the oldest male. When the Egyptians woke up and discovered that all their oldest males were dead, they immediately set the Israelites free.

Three lamb sacrifices – consecrating the temple so God would be present with His people, forgiveness and covering for sin, and deliverance from bondage. But in none of these instances was the lamb said to be God. In fact, in the sin offering, the lamb represents sinful man, not God. However Isaiah uses the lamb for the Servant of the Lord. Isaiah contains several songs of the Servant of the Lord, and these obviously refer to the Messiah. Let's read the Servant Song that begins in chapter 52.

Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently;
He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high.
Just as many were astonished at you,
So His visage was marred more than any man,
And His form more than the sons of men;

So shall He sprinkle many nations.
Kings shall shut their mouths at Him;
For what had not been told them they shall see,
And what they had not heard they shall consider. Isaiah 52:13-15

This song describes the Servant as both exalted and tortured. Nevertheless, he will have a universal influence and will command kings. The song continues in a similar vein in chapter 53. We wish to focus on verses 6 and 7.

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.
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 53:6-7

Here the Servant, which throughout Isaiah is identified as the Messiah, is pictured as a lamb. He was a sacrificial lamb – a lamb which died for the sins of us all. Just as a man would lay his hands on the lamb of the sin offering, thus symbolically transferring his sin to the animal, so God laid the sin of the human race on Jesus. Just as the sin would be forgiven and covered when the animal died, so our sin was forgiven and covered when Jesus died.

Is this what John meant when He said that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? Was John thinking of Isaiah 52 and 53? Perhaps. But if God had meant us to think only of this verse, He could have quoted it here. It is more likely that Jesus is the fulfilment of *all* the Old Testament lambs.

Jesus is the lamb of God. He is not merely *a* lamb – He is *the* lamb. All previous lambs were symbols of the real lamb. All along Jesus was the lamb God had prepared to take away the sin of the world. Until Jesus came, other lambs were a preview of the work that Jesus did for us. Jesus is the sin-bearing lamb. He took upon Himself our sin and died. When Jesus died, sin died with Him. Atonement for sin has been accomplished, and our sins are forgiven. Jesus is the deliverance lamb. Just as the blood of the Passover lamb set the Israelites free from Pharaoh, so Jesus' blood sets us free from bondage. The real bondage we experience is slavery to sin. Scripture speaks of sin as a power which controls us. When Jesus' blood was wiped upon the cross, we were set free from slavery to sin. Jesus is also the consecrating lamb. Just as the daily sacrifice consecrated the temple and made holy place for God to live with His people, so Jesus' death consecrates us and enables us to have fellowship with God. His blood makes sinful people holy and able to approach our holy God.

Takes Away the Sin of the World

Did you notice that Jesus did not take away the *sins* of the world, but the *sin* of the world? What difference does one letter make? It depends on what you think sin is. Most of us, when we think of sin, think of specific acts – stealing, murder, sex outside of marriage. It is true that these acts and many others are sins, and they alienate us from God. But the Bible also talks about sin as an entity in itself. We already mentioned that sin is a force which enslaves us. Scripture uses many terms to explain sin. Sin is called separation from God. Isaiah 59:2 says, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.” Sin is breaking God's law. This view of sin is in almost every

chapter of the Old Testament. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of sin is rebellion. In Romans 8:7-8 we read, "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God." The mind of the flesh is Paul's term for the mind not controlled by God's Spirit. The person who does not have God's Spirit is hostile toward God. He is in a permanent state of rebellion against God. This condition goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, when Adam rebelled against God by eating the fruit which God forbade him to eat. Adam had a choice. He could either side with God, or side with Satan. He chose to side with Satan, and mankind has been in rebellion against God ever since. It is parallel to your earthly citizenship. You are a citizen of the US, or China, or some other country because your parents were citizens of that country. Now as a citizen you have all the rights and responsibilities of a citizen. If your country goes to war, you are at war with your enemy. If your country makes an alliance with another country, you reap the benefits of that alliance. We all were born citizens of the human race, and participate in the affairs of our race. Ever since Adam rebelled against God, we have been at war with Him.

Individual acts of sin are simply an expression of the sin nature that we all possess from birth.

1. Takes away the sin of the world.

Not sins, but sin.

Sins are the fruit of sin nature.

Gingko tree- Futile to sweep up smelly blossom, must cut down tree.

2. Sin.

Separation.

Law breaking.

Rebellion.

Adam in garden- Became allied with the enemy. All Adam's children are too.

You are a citizen of the US because your parents are.

We all are born allied to Satan.

3. Jesus takes away sin.

Not only forgiveness.

Takes away sin for good.

4. Of world.

Not only Jews.

New world in view.

Isaiah 53:4-5

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 bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.

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