

The Lamb of God.

John 1: 29-39.

E. Dennett.

Christian Friend, vol. 8, 1881, p. 309.

There is no character in which Christ is presented more precious to the believer than that of Lamb of God. Our hymns of praise — indeed the hymns of all ages — bear witness to this. The reason is evident. It brings before us, in one word, both the beauty of His character, and His sacrificial work. The very term is redolent of the cross, and consequently of His sufferings and death. It therefore appeals to the deepest affections of every true believer; and, at the same time, when rightly understood, conserves the doctrines of grace which centre in and radiate from the cross of Calvary.

It is not a little remarkable that John the Baptist should be the chosen instrument thus to describe his Lord. The herald of the kingdom, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, hake straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias," it is yet he who proclaims the victim character of Him who was presented to Israel as the King; and thereby, consciously or unconsciously, he foretold His rejection and death. This is in harmony with the gospel in which this utterance of his is recorded. In the synoptical gospels Christ is presented to Israel for acceptance, and His rejection is seen in the course of their narrative. St. John begins with His rejection, as he says, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." (John 1: 10.) We have consequently the glories of the person of Christ described in a way that would not otherwise have been possible. The first chapter indeed covers almost the whole field of His dignities and exaltation, whether essential or acquired. It commenced with His eternal existence as the Word — "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God; it exhibits Him as Incarnate — "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" — as the only Begotten of (with, *παρὰ*) the Father, the only begotten Son in the bosom of the Father, Lamb of God, as the One who baptizeth with the Holy Ghost, as the Son of God (as born into the earth according to Psalm 2 and Luke 1: 35), and it concludes with His title as Son of man — the character in which, consequent upon His rejection by the Jewish nation, He will assume universal dominion.

The Jews had sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask John, Who art thou? He told them that he was not the Christ, but the voice of one crying in the wilderness, etc. (vv. 19-27.) "The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." (John 1: 29.) The Jews had failed to understand the mission of John; their eyes could not discern in him the forerunner of the Messiah, and consequently John now proclaims the Messiah, in His suffering character, as the altar victim, God's Lamb.

The question is often asked, What is the origin of this appellation? Of what especial lamb is Christ the antitype? There is very little doubt that there is a tacit reference to Genesis 22. When Abraham was on his way to mount Moriah to offer up Isaac, in obedience to the divine command, Isaac said, "Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?"

And Abraham said, My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt-offering." (vv. 7, 8.) And this is the point here. The Lamb of God is the Lamb of God's own providing, and now to deal once and for ever with the question of sin, and the sin of the world. In Abraham's case it was for a burnt-offering, for the question of sin was not yet raised; but every Jew would be familiar with the thought of sacrificing for sin. The Passover lamb, while not exactly a sacrificial victim, told them of the need of blood to screen them from the judgment of a holy God, while the daily sacrifice of a lamb morning and evening would remind them of their need of atonement; for the burnt-offering was accepted for the offerer "to make atonement for him" (Lev. 1: 4), and its blood was sprinkled "round about upon the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation." There should therefore have been no difficulty in the mind of a Jew from this description of Christ; for it really embodied the essence of their own economy. The Lamb of God was the one sacrifice to which all their own directly pointed — the one sacrifice, provided for them in the grace of God, which, since provided by Himself, would meet His own mind, and abrogate the necessity of their continually offering those sacrifices which could never take away sin. What godly Jew, moreover, could have read: "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; 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 hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth: He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth" (Isa. 53: 5-7) — what godly Jew, I say, could have read this chapter without expecting Christ to suffer for sin? The announcement therefore that He was the Lamb of God should have filled their hearts with gratitude and joy.

There are two things in these words of John which demand attention. He cries, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." We have, then, to consider what He is, and what He does. To whom did John point when he said, "Behold the Lamb of God"? It was Jesus. And who was He? That wondrous Person whose manifold dignities and glories are displayed in this chapter. He is the Word who was with God and who was God; He is the Creator of heaven and earth; "for all things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men." He is the only begotten Son of the Father, and the only Revealer of the Father. On the other side He was man, and on earth He was known as Jesus of Nazareth; but as born on earth, He was heir to all the rights of David, and hence the Christ, the Son of God, and the King of Israel.

Such was the Lamb of God as to His Person. Not that all this could have been discerned by the natural eye. Nay, He stood among those who came to John for baptism, as One whom they knew not. Outwardly, He was but a man amongst His fellow-men; but faith discerned His true character, and His exalted dignity. "We beheld His glory," says the evangelist, "the glory as of the only Begotten of the Father." To the anointed eye, therefore, Jesus, the Lamb of God, stood revealed as God manifest in flesh. And had he been less, He could not have been the Lamb of God. There was no other in the heaven or earth that could have answered to the mind of God, or, as the sacrifice for sin, have met all His holy claims. Nor was there any other that could have undertaken the cause, and stood in the place of sinners. As the perfect Man — without spot or blemish — He could offer Himself as the holy victim upon God's altar; as God, He imparted such infinite value to His sacrifice that it could avail for the whole world. We may well, therefore, take up the language of John, and, repeating his cry, say, Behold Him; yea —

"Behold the Lamb! 'Tis He who bore
My burden on the tree;
And paid in blood the dreadful score,
The ransom due for me.
"I look to Him till sight endear
The Saviour to my heart;
To Him I look who calms my fear,
Nor from Himself depart.
"I look until His precious love
My every thought control,
Its vast constraining influence prove
O'er body, spirit, soul."

We must also enquire what is meant by taking away the sin of the world. Two errors in connection with this passage have to be noted in order to be avoided. The first consists in the simple addition of a letter, making it "sins" instead of sin, an error which has been widely propagated in well-known forms of prayer. Now trifling as the question of a letter may seem, if it were true that Christ as the Lamb of God taketh away the sins of the world, universal salvation apart from faith would be the necessary consequence — a doctrine which undermines the fundamental truths of Christianity. It must be, therefore, urgently insisted upon that it is the sin, not the sins, of the world which is here mentioned. Nor does it say, secondly, that He has taken away the sin of the world. He *taketh* it away; that is, as we shall see farther on, He has done the work which will secure this result, but its accomplishment will not be reached until the end of all things.

It may help us to apprehend the meaning of these words if we compare another Scripture. "Once," says the writer of the Hebrews, "hath He appeared in the end of the world" (in the consummation of the ages) "to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." (Heb. 9: 26.) The sacrifice has been offered, but the sin has not yet been, though it will be, put away. This is very obvious. Even the believer, though he is perfectly cleansed, and has no more conscience of sins, has sin in him. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1: 8.) He is to reckon himself dead to it, but actually it is still in him. There remains, however, nothing more to do for its abrogation. The sacrifice of the Lamb of God so glorified God in every attribute of His character that, on the ground of its eternal value, He will eventually put away sin for ever from His sight. The blood of Christ has such infinite value in His eyes that

righteously — yea, He can glorify Himself in the total putting away of sin, and the new heavens and the new earth will be the everlasting witness that it is done. Then He that sits upon the throne will say, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 22: 5); and every trace of sin and its defilement will be gone for ever. Such is the force of this Scripture. It is the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world; for it is He who has laid the foundation for the accomplishment of this glorious result by the sacrifice of Himself. blessed be His name!

But it is not only as the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world that John indicates Him. He declares Him more fully: "This is He of whom I said, After me cometh a Man which is preferred before me: for He was before me. And I knew Him not but that He should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon Him. And I knew Him not: but He that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, *the same is He which baptizeth. with the Holy Ghost.* And I saw, and bare record that this is *the Son of God.*" (John 1: 30-34.) No sooner have we been invited to behold Christ as the victim — the sacrificial Lamb — than we are directed to gaze upon Him in His exaltation — as the One baptizing with the Holy Ghost from His place at the right hand of God. This is the way of the Holy Spirit. If He delights to dwell on the lowly, suffering aspect of the works of Christ, to unfold to us the wondrous character of His death, and its far-reaching and comprehensive results, it is no less His joy to point Him out in the glory whence He sends forth the Holy Ghost, and to declare that He who was thus sealed as man by the descent of the Spirit is no other than the Son of God. The cross and the throne are ever connected. If the Lord Jesus humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, it is on that account that "God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2: 9-11.)

Having thus unveiled His coming exaltation and glory, John again presents Him as the Lamb of God. "Again the next day after John stood, and two of His disciples, and looking upon Jesus as He walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God." (vv. 35, 36.) In the former passage it was Christ in His sacrificial character — the meek and gentle victim — offering Himself for the sin of the world; in this it is the display of what He is in Himself that excites the wondering admiration of His forerunner. Looking upon Jesus *as He walked*, his heart is filled with adoring praise, and he says, Behold the Lamb of God; behold Himself, the beauty of His ways, the perfectness of His walk, the unfoldings of a divine-human life, which was in itself a full and perfect moral presentation of God to man. It was indeed an object that might rivet the gaze of all beholders. For that lowly Man, whom John thus designated, was the only One on earth who fully answered the desires of the heart of God, the only One on whom He could look, and in whom He could rest with complacency and delight. John therefore was in the current of God's own thoughts when he pointed his disciples to this beautiful Lamb of God.

This, at the same time, helps us to understand the significance of this second cry of the Baptist. John himself was arrested as he looked upon Jesus as he walked; and in utter forgetfulness of self, knowing that his lesser light must fade away and be extinguished by this heavenly luminary, he desires that his own disciples should be occupied with the object that had

drawn forth and absorbed his affections. He had first proclaimed Him as the sacrifice for sin; for we can never know the Person of Christ until the question of sin has been settled, and then he pointed Him out to his disciples as the object for their hearts, as the One who was entitled, in virtue of His sacrifice and what it accomplished, to claim their allegiance and affections. And very blessed is it for us all when the claims of Christ are fully acknowledged. Under the pressure of our sin and guilt we are all willing, nay, often driven, to seek relief through His blood; but our danger is, when the relief is obtained, of forgetting that He who has borne our sins in His own body on the tree, has by that very fact the right to all that we have and are. The right? Most surely *the right!!* But how it evidences the feebleness of our conceptions of what He is, and what He has done, when we have to argue and enforce it. Who would speak of a mother having the right to the love of her child? In like manner to speak of Christ having the right to our love, is only to prove the hardness of our hearts. To behold Him as the One who has taken away our sin should be enough to bind us for ever to His service, to keep us at His feet as His willing servants, to melt our hearts to gratitude and praise.

Certainly a great effect was produced upon the two disciples of John. It was like the presentation of a strong magnet to them; for when they heard John's word they followed Jesus. It drew them away from their beloved master, the Baptist, and constrained by the attractions of the Lamb of God, they followed Him, and became His disciples. And it is ever so. Nothing but the Person of Christ can wean us from earthly things, detach us from all our surroundings, disentangle us from our most intimate ties, and make us His willing-hearted and delighted followers. Hence the great loss of those who stop short at His work. Indeed His work can never be understood aright until after we have known Himself; and then in fellowship with His own heart, because at perfect rest in His presence, our own hearts completely satisfied, we shall behold, as we contemplate the cross, blessings and glories we had never dreamt of, rising up before our souls as the fruit and consequence of the work which He finished on Calvary.

But there is another thing. If the two disciples are drawn after Jesus, His heart goes forth to them. "Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi (which is to say, being interpreted, Master), where dwellest thou? He saith unto them, Come and see. They came and saw where He dwelt, and abode with Him that day: for it was about the tenth hour." (vv. 38, 39.) Nothing more delights the heart of Christ than the desires of the soul after Him. Attracted to Him, these two disciples would learn more of the One whose beauty had begun to dawn upon their souls, though as yet their apprehensions were so feeble and inadequate. The Lord knew their weakness, and thus He allures them on by His gentleness and grace. In their timidity they might have been repelled by reserve; but He who does not quench the smoking flax will intensify their interest and desire; and thus He turned, and seeing them following, said, "What seek ye?" He knew what they sought, their hearts lay bare before His eyes; but by this simple question He was but leading them on, throwing around them the cords of His love to bind them to Himself. Emboldened, therefore, by such grace, they respond, "Master, where dwellest thou?" It may be that they little understood the largeness of their request, yet surely the Spirit of God animated their words. The home of the Lamb of God! To discover this is to learn the whole secret of redemption; yea, to know the Son as the Revealer of the Father. For we read in this very chapter, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him." (v. 18.) No earthly dwelling could claim the honour of being His home. On earth He had not where to lay His head;

but even while a stranger here, and walking this weary scene, He could speak of Himself as "in heaven" (John 3: 13); and from the Scripture just cited we learn that in heaven the bosom of the Father was His home.

Nor will He withhold this secret from His own. Hence He replies, in answer to their question, "Come and see." They came and saw where He dwelt, and abode with Him that day; for it was about the tenth hour. He thus led them into His own dwelling, and in the intimacies of this secret fellowship unveiled His glories and satisfied their hearts. And surely we may see in this a figure of the final gathering of His own into His presence. Taking, indeed, the narrative in its connection, we cannot fail to apprehend this deeper significance; for, first, as pointed out, we have the Lamb of God as the sacrifice — the One that taketh away the sin of the world; then, after announcing Him as the One who was sealed, and who baptizeth with the Holy Ghost, we have the two disciples following Him, and finally the goal of discipleship is discovered; viz., the home of Jesus. He Himself said, "Father, I will that they also; whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world," (John 17: 24.) This is the consummation of all His desires for His own, to have them with Himself, and to see them entering into His joy in His exaltation and glory — all the fruit of His own travail on the cross. It is, therefore, the highest expression of the blessedness of the redeemed, to be for ever with the Lord. He laid the foundation for this in His sacrifice; He presents Himself to their hearts as meeting all their needs as sinners, and then by His grace and love He attracts them to Himself, and last of all He comes to receive them unto Himself, that where He is, we may be also.

The Scriptures lead us on still further. They permit us to obtain glimpses of the place the Lamb of God occupies in the glory. In the book of Revelation we behold the Lamb as it had been slain, in the midst of the throne, and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders. We behold Him there as the centre of God's ways in government on the earth, the unfolders of His counsels, and the - object of heaven's worship and praise. The elders, the angels, "every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth," and the four living creatures, alike acknowledge His worthiness and supremacy, and render their willing homage. The Lamb that was slain is now confessed to be worthy "to take the book and open the seals thereof," on the ground of the redemption effected by His precious blood; and the angels likewise proclaim His worthiness "to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing." (Rev. 5: 6-14.) Still further revelations of His exaltation and glory may be gleaned by those who desire to follow out the subject. May the Lord so entrance the hearts of His own with the glories of the Lamb that it may be a relief to them to fall before Him in worship and praise.

"Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou,

That every knee to Thee should bow." E. D.