

## God's Lamb and Mary's

Years ago, a preacher friend presented a lesson entitled, "Mary Had a Little Lamb, His Name was Jesus." You might say he had a rhyme and a reason for the title.

At this time of year, we focus on and get excited about the birth of baby Jesus. We think of the innocence of that baby and the hardships Joseph and Mary faced to get to Bethlehem and fulfill the prophet's foresight (**Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:6**). Mary laid her baby in a sheep's feeding trough, wrapped in swaddling cloths just like the shepherds did when a lamb was born to the Bethlehem flocks.

One of the reasons this is such a popular event is because a baby is not very intimidating to us unless you happen to be a new parent. Baby Jesus is cute and adorable. We want to reach out and relieve Mary of some of her new mother's stresses and take care of the infant for her. God provided as He always does. The wise men brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that symbolically and practically cared for the child on the family's journey to Egypt, providing another prophetic fulfillment (**Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:15**).

While we relish Mary's cute baby, we must not forget that He was also God's Son, and God sent His Son for a serious purpose that John the Baptist pointed out in the **Apostle John's Gospel, 1:29-30** (NLT):

**The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup> He is the one I was talking about when I said, 'A man is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'**

The title, "Lamb of God," means "God's sacrifice." It is no coincidence that the Romans and Jews crucified Jesus at Passover when thousands of lambs were offered in remembrance of God's deliverance of the nation when He "passed over" the houses with the lambs' blood on the doorposts and lintels. Jesus is the "Good Shepherd" and the "Lamb of God." While we enjoy the festivities of His birth, we must not forget His purpose. He reminded His disciples of His purpose when he spoke to them about greatness (**Mark 10:43-45**, NKJV, emphasis added).

**"<sup>43</sup> Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. <sup>44</sup> And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."**

We talk about a baby being a sign of love between a husband and wife. The presence of baby Jesus indicates God's love for us. In a little over thirty-three years, that baby would grow and become the most remarkable man ever. Not only that, He would go to the cross to take our sins and endure the "curse of the law" on our behalf. Listen to Paul in **Galatians 3:13-14** (NKJV):

**<sup>13</sup> Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"), <sup>14</sup> that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Cf., Deuteronomy 21:23).**

We cannot take away our sins or the curse of the Law when we violate its precepts and commands. The Law reveals our transgressions and debt to God but does not provide redemption. Christ does that for us at the cross.

Let's pause for just a moment and look at history. According to Columbus' personal log, his purpose in seeking "undiscovered worlds" was to:

“... bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the heathens” (to hasten the return of Christ according to **Matthew 24:14** (NKJV), “**And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.**”

As a result, Columbus had his men erect a large wooden cross on every island where they stopped “as a token of Jesus Christ our Lord, and in honor of the Christian faith.”

We may use the cross as a decoration or in jewelry, but it is a reminder of the purpose and suffering of Christ. He was born to die for the sins of all humanity, from Adam to us and those yet to be born. **George Washington** carried a set of prayers scholars believe came from an Anglican prayer book. In the Sunday evening section, Washington prayed about Christ’s purpose.

But, O God, who art rich in mercy and plenteous in redemption, mark not, I beseech thee, what I have done amiss; remember that I am but dust, and remit my transgressions, negligences & ignorances, and cover them all with the absolute obedience of Thy dear Son, that those sacrifices which I have offered may be accepted by Thee, in and for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ offered upon the cross for me; for His sake, ease me of the burden of my sins, and give me grace that by the call of the Gospel I may rise from the slumber of sin into the newness of life.

Jesus spoke seven sayings from His cross. These are:

1. **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).**
2. **“Today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).**
3. **“Woman, behold your son!” (John 19:26-27).**
4. **“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46).**
5. **“I thirst!” (John 19:28).**
6. **“It is finished!” (John 19:30).**
7. **“Father, ‘into Your hands I commit My spirit’” (Luke 23:46).**

When my wife was in the process of dying, I preached a series of sermons based on these seven sayings. While all of the sayings are important, Jesus’ conversation with the thief on the cross encouraged me for her. Let’s consider the picture of Jesus and the two men crucified with Him.

The two men were guilty “evil-doers” and deserving of death. Both had hatefully berated Him (**Matthew 27:40-44**). Later, when one cursed Christ again, the other had a change of heart and responded, “**Do you not even fear God?**” (**Luke 23:40**). He confessed their just condemnation and Jesus’ innocence saying, “**This Man has done nothing wrong**” (**verse 41**). He expressed his faith that Christ would rule over God’s Kingdom and said, “**Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom**” (**verse 42**). Jesus rewarded the man’s faith with a promise, “**Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.**”

The cross of Christ is a reminder that we cannot save ourselves. We are dependent on His substitutionary sacrifice taking what we deserve. The writer of Hebrews declares (**Hebrews 7:25**, NKJV), “<sup>25</sup> **Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost [or forever] those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.**”

The two criminals on either side of Jesus depict us all. These men were likely insurrectionists who opposed Rome and their Jewish collaborators. They did more than walk through the Roman Antonio Fortress looking at the art on the sixth day of the first month. They rebelled. Both men were angry at their environment and

fate. If they had heard of Jesus, they expected Him to be the warrior Messiah who would overthrow the Roman and Jewish leaders' injustices.

Even John the Baptist wondered about Jesus because He did not do what John expected. John had been preparing the way for Christ and preached hard lessons calling the Jewish leaders a "**brood of vipers.**" He said, "**the ax is laid to the root of the trees**" and that the One to follow Him would bring a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire" (or judgment, see **Matthew 3:7-12**). Yet, Jesus wasn't acting like what he expected. As a result, even after John had declared Jesus to be the "lamb of God," he sent disciples to ask if He was the "Coming One" or if they needed to look for someone else (**Matthew 11:3**).

These two crucified men were angry, caught in their sins, and the Romans carried out their death sentence. It was all over for them and they expressed their anger and disappointment at Jesus. We've been there, too. We have lashed out at God for some perceived injustice that happened to us. God disappointed us when he did not bail us out of our problems so we raged at Him.

Then we see something extraordinary. One of the men who had cursed Jesus had a change of heart. Instead of continuing in his anger, he repented, defended Jesus with the cursing criminal, and turned to Jesus for salvation. Then Jesus made the famous promise of paradise. He understood that he could do nothing else.

One criminal represents lost humanity that never repents and dies in their sins. The second depicts lost humanity who turns to Jesus for salvation without any hope of earning it by good works of his own. Peter pointed this out to the Sanhedrin and said, "<sup>12</sup>**Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved**" (**Acts 4:12**, NKJV).

We identify with the criminal on one of the two crosses. We are either dying in our sinful rebellion, or the atoning blood of Jesus saves us. The Man on the middle cross paid the price. We can appreciate Him, but we cannot identify with His sacrifice.

**Pastor Alistair Begg** once illustrated the thief's salvation by looking into the angels' response to the man's arrival paradise. The angels asked the man, "How did you get here?" The man replied, "I don't know." They bantered back and forth and the angel called his supervising angel who interrogated the man with a series of theological questions on topics like "justification by faith," "eschatology," and "sanctification." The man couldn't answer and the angels asked, "How did you get here?" all the man could say was, "Because the Man on the middle cross said I could come."

That is the same reason you and I will give, not because we did all the right things, correctly understood every theological point, or that our good deeds outweighed the bad. If we sin in one part of the law, we break it all and we cannot keep it all. Without Jesus' sacrificial death, every one of us stands condemned (**Romans 3:23; 6:23**).

Years ago, a church in Ft. Lauderdale launched a door-knocking campaign to evangelize their community. They asked the question, "If you were to die tonight and God asked you why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?" If we answer that question beginning with "Because I ...," we have answered wrongly. The correct response begins, "Because Jesus ..." Salvation is only by the cross of Christ. We can NEVER do enough good work to get it all right and get there on our own merits.

When we take our eyes off the cross, we revert to doing good works as a means of salvation. As a result, we either find ourselves in deep despair or an abusive arrogance. I have been with some Christians nearing the end of their lives who said, “I sure hope I did enough to go to heaven.” They died in misery and guilt because none of us can “do enough.” We must rely on the One who kept the Law correctly and assigns His righteousness to us.

I also have been and been around arrogant Christians who think they have it all correct. They are doing everything that God expects, or at least what they think He expects, so they have gained the right to condescend to others, pointing out their flaws. As a result, they have taken their eyes off the Man on the middle cross and are looking at themselves. One fact God guarantees is that no matter how hard we try, we will fail at some point. The two thieves on their crosses reflect **1 John 1:8-10** (NKJV). One confessed his sins, the other died in his.

**<sup>8</sup> If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.**

If we try to go on our own, we will have regrets. Jesus can take away our regrets through His lovingkindness at the cross. When we depend on Him fully, we can let our past go with its burdens and sorrow. Let me tell you a personal story, make an application and close.

For years I carried the guilt of not going to Vietnam with my peers. I didn’t “dodge the draft” or burn my draft card, but I did not have to go. I felt deficient. One summer, while I was in graduate school, I struck up a conversation with one of my classmates. He had been to Vietnam for two tours. I told him of my guilt and regret, and he said, “Stop it! I’ll make a deal with you. I made one tour for me and one for you. You no longer have to bear that guilt.” From that moment, I never felt those emotions. Someone did it for me!

The same is true for us and our standing before God. Sensitive hearts will feel the sorrow and shame of sin and the regret of failing God. The people at Pentecost were “**cut to the heart**” by their participation in Jesus’ death (**Acts 2:37**). Their (and our) sinfulness crucified Jesus. Still, He redeems us all by taking our sins on Himself, freeing us from self-inflicted guilt, shame, and sorrow.

As we remember the birth of the Lamb, let us also remember His purpose in coming. His advent was for more than a little self-help to make us a little better than we were, or motivating us to be successful in life. He came to take on all aspects of our sins so that we could receive His righteousness (**Romans 4:16-25**).

Let’s Keep The Light *of Christ’s Purpose in Coming to Earth* Burning!

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