

October 19, 2014

## Behold the Lamb

Exodus 12:1 – 13; 29 – 41

Last week we took a panoramic view, as it were, over chapters five through eleven where Moses and Aaron come to Pharaoh ten times, delivering the message of Yahweh – 'Let My people go that they may worship Me'. And ten times they are rebuffed by Pharaoh's unwillingness to obey Him. '**Who is the LORD – that I should obey His voice?**' And what he's saying is what people have always said, 'Why should I obey this God? I have my own gods, I have my own faith – why should you insist that your faith is the only way to God? Why should yours be true and mine not? What makes yours so different, what makes yours so unique? And it is chapter twelve here that gives the definitive answer. In the previous narrative we saw a powerful part of the answer to the question – **Who is the LORD – that I should obey His voice?** That is, we should obey because He is the only God; we should obey because He is the only Creator; and we should obey because He is the only Savior. But here in chapter twelve we get the rest of the answer. And it's all in the story of the Passover.

This story is at the center of who we are as Christians. It is at the center of the Jewish faith as well. The definitive thing about Jews – what really defines them as Jews wherever they live, is the Passover. You can't be a Jew and not celebrate Passover. And a transformed Passover is at the center of what makes a Christian a Christian. That is why we celebrate a kind of revised Passover meal every week – the Lord's Table. But at the center of the center, at the core of this faith is something utterly unique – the bloody death of a helpless victim. You don't find that in any other religion. What makes our God unique? What makes Christianity unique? At its core is this story of the bloody death of a helpless victim, a lamb. This chapter helps us understand why that is so. **We'll look at the story of the Lamb; the history of the Lamb; and the revelation of the Lamb.** The story, the history, the revelation.

First of all this chapter tells us **the story of the Lamb**. And in this story of the Lamb, we first saw God's dealings with Pharaoh in the last few chapters in order to compel him to let His people go. As we look at the mounting pressure on Pharaoh through the plagues of blood and frogs and flies and hail and darkness and so on, we almost wonder why we didn't just jump to this last plague – the death of the firstborn and be done with it? In chapter eleven the LORD tells Moses: *'Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here.'* The promise of getting out of Egypt was linked to this last, disastereous plague; so why not just get on with it? The Lord doesn't get on with it because liberation, **deliverance**, for His people was only half of the solution.

In chapter 6 God tells Moses: *'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.'* There were two things God wanted to accomplish with His people in Egypt – deliverance and redemption. The tenth plague accomplished the first, deliverance. But that still left the the people's relationship to the LORD to be established. And that was the work of the Passover – redemption. You see, Yahweh has come to Egypt, revealing Himself as absolute Lord and the ultimate judge. All the plagues represented Lordship over everything and His judgment on man's sin and rebellion. And Israel's problem now is not so much how they are are going escape Pharaoh; but rather how they can stand before such a God.

Pharaoh has stubbornly resisted; the Israelites were waiting; and God finally says, 'Here it is, the final judgment' – *'For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.'* Exodus 12:12 And we might be tempted to say at this point, 'It's about time you took care of that rascal and gave those Egyptians what they deserved'. And we would be wrong. Because the Lord also goes on to say in verse 23, which we didn't read, *'For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you.'* In other words, the plague of death is coming upon the Egyptians **and** the Israelites – everybody. And the only thing standing between the living and the dead is a little, defenseless lamb.

Last week we talked about the fact that when you disobey God, when you violate His design for creation or His purpose for your body, or your relationships, or anything else, you unleash the forces of chaos and disintegration in your life. If you put anything ahead of God in your affections, if you serve other gods, your work, your family, your pleasures, anything; eventually what comes in is disintegration, chaos, death, the destroyer comes. If you disobey His command to '**Love your neighbor as yourself**' and forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you; you will experience physical, and emotional and spiritual breakdown as your grudge becomes a poison in your soul. God says to us, 'I put you in the world to love Me supremely, to worship Me only, to obey Me. If you don't live the way I tell you to live, all the coherence in your life will turn into incoherence. All the integration in your life will turn into disintegration. Everything will start to fall apart – the destroyer will come'.

What this is pointing to is that day when the full judgment of God falls. Not just the forces of chaos and disintegration that are unleashed in our lives by our obedience now, but a final, ultimate judgment on man's sin and rebellion. And what we see here is a sort of preview – a preliminary, local, but utterly destructive judgment day. And He tells the Israelites that He's going to unleash the destroyer and it's going to wipe out not only the greatest political and military power in the world, but anyone else who is not under protection. And the only means of standing when that judgment falls – the only way you can face this terrifying judgment – **is with Shaun the sheep**. God says, 'I want you to take a lamb, kill it, eat it with your family, and put its blood on the doorposts of your house – and the destroyer will pass over you'.

And the Scripture records that '*...the people of Israel went and did so; as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did.*' Exodus 12:28 Then, at midnight, the destroyer was turned loose over Egypt, and from the first-born in the palace to the first-born of the captive in the dungeon and the first-born of the cattle – there was not a dwelling place in all of Egypt where there was not someone dead. But wherever the lamb had been slaughtered and eaten and the blood put on the doorposts, no one died. That's the story of the lamb. But if you don't know anything about the history of the lamb, you won't get it – it won't make sense.

The story of the **lamb has a history**, it has a context and we need to understand that to understand the Passover. The history of the lamb goes back to Genesis 22 and the story of Abraham and Isaac. We've already been through that section so I'm not going to get into all the details. But the essence of the story is, Abraham finally has a son after years of waiting and one day he hears God say, 'Abraham, take your son – your only son – and offer him as a sacrifice to me'. When we hear that for the first time, it's probably disturbing, even disgusting. 'Kill your son as a sacrifice to God?' What's going on here? That's insane!' But if you think that you don't understand the history or the cultural context of Abraham'.

People in Abraham's culture were very different from our culture today. Unlike us, particularly Americans, they didn't have ambitions for individual prominence, or individual prosperity or even individual success. Everything pointed to family prominence, family prosperity, family fame and success. You had ambitions for your family; you didn't think in terms of individuals, except where it benefited the family. As a result, if one member of the family failed the family somehow, shamed the family, the entire family was responsible. The individual's shame or failure was reflected in the whole family. Maybe you've read the story of Achen in Joshua. Before Israel defeated Jericho, God told them 'Everything in that city belongs to Me – don't take any gold or silver or anything that belongs to Me.' But this guy Achen saw some stuff he liked, and took it and hid it in his tent. And when he was found out, not only was he put to death, but also his family.

And from our highly individualistic and historically removed viewpoint – that seems terribly unfair. Yet it serves to point out how the lives of individuals were totally bound up in their family relationships. In Abraham's culture, individual prosperity and success were totally related to the success and prosperity of the family; as were shame and failure. It was a corporate thing. Joel Kaminsky, the author of **Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible** explains that in this culture '*...not only is one responsible for one's own behavior, but one must also actively prevent others from sinning.*' In other words, there was such a sense of solidarity with the group with which you were identified that one person's misdeeds colored the entire group and incurred some kind of debt that had to be paid. This is a theme that runs all through the Bible, and we don't have the time to trace it all out this morning.

But what it gives us is some insight into just what was going on here during the Passover. What we read over and over in this Exodus account is something about a firstborn. God told Moses to tell Pharaoh this: *'Israel is My firstborn son – so I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me; but you have refused to let him go. Behold I will kill your firstborn son'*. And now the last plague is the death of all the first-borns in Egypt. There is something going on here; and actually it becomes clearer the deeper into Exodus we go. But we need to tackle some of it right here.

At the beginning of the very next chapter we read: *"The LORD said to Moses, 'Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.'"* And this is reiterated over and over throughout the books of Moses. *'The life of every firstborn is forfeit unless it is redeemed.'* And we don't really understand that, but it was an unmistakable message to these people. All the hopes and dreams of a family was tied up and embodied in the firstborn. It was the firstborn that represented the face of the family. The firstborn son was the family. The whole family was legally, and emotionally, in the son. All of their hopes rode on this son. All of the family's name rode on that child. And what God was saying was that there was a debt hanging over the head of every family on the face of the earth. A debt of sin. ***And the firstborn is liable for that debt, he's the representative for the family; he's the substitute;*** he is liable for the way you are living, and his life is forfeit unless he is redeemed – bought back.

So when Abraham heard, 'Give me your son Isaac as a burnt offering', Abraham knew immediately what was going on. He didn't think God was proposing some wild insanity. He realized that God was calling in his debt – a debt He had every right to call in – ***Isaac was about to die for Abraham's sin.*** That's why he didn't argue. He understood the rightness of the demand. He no doubt struggled with the demand, but it wasn't a struggle that said, 'How can you be so unjust?' but one that said, 'How can You be both a just God, punishing sin, ***and*** be a gracious God, allowing my firstborn to live, because You have said through Isaac the promise would come? How can you be a God of justice ***and*** a God of the promise?' That was his dilemma, that was the struggle – not 'How can you ask for my firstborn?'

And so as they are walking up the mountain, and Isaac turns to Abraham and asks, 'Dad, we've got wood, we've got fire, we've got a knife – so where's the lamb? Abraham's answer was full of expectant hope: *'God will provide for Himself a lamb'*. In other words Abraham was saying, 'The punishment for my sin is just but I am trusting that God will provide for Himself a lamb so my little lamb won't have to die'. And that is just the concept we struggle with – that anybody has to die at all. We fail to fully embrace the fact that we have a debt of sin hanging over us that God our Creator, Sustainer, Giver of Life has every right to call in – at any moment. Abraham knew this – he knew what we often reject, that God created us, sustains us, gives us life and breath and health, and therefore we owe it to God to live for Him completely and yet we don't. We owe our neighbor to love them like we love ourselves but we don't. We live as though God owes us – we live as though we made ourselves. But the Lord says, 'Unless you are redeemed, you'll die for your sins'.

Now here in chapter 12, again the life of the firstborn is forfeit and the only hope is a lamb. And to press the point, the Lord tells Moses that the destroyer is coming not just for the Egyptians, but for anyone not under the blood of the lamb. In verse 22 He tells the Israelites that they are to put the blood of that lamb over the lintel and the two doorposts and *'...none of you shall go out of the door until morning'*. That meant that your race would not save you – your religion wouldn't mean a thing. The destroyer doesn't care if you are an Israelite or an Egyptian. It doesn't matter if you call yourself a worshiper of the True God or an idolater. If you're not under the protection of the lamb – you're lost. If you were morally ethical, biblically righteous, doctrinally proper, but you're out from under the blood – you're dead. You'll be as dead as those pagan Egyptians you despise.

But the good news was that God provided for Himself a lamb. In every house in Egypt the text tells us *'...there was not a house where someone was not dead.'* Let me put that another way. ***In every house in Egypt that night, there was either a dead son or a dead lamb.*** One or the other. In the homes of the Israelites there was a lamb that got what the firstborn deserved. The lamb paid the debt so that the firstborn did not have to pay the debt for the family. Every firstborn Hebrew son must have looked at that lamb and said to himself, 'The only reason I'm not dead is because that lamb is. The only reason I'm not dead is because it is the lamb's blood over the door and not mine'.

But there is something deeper here than the redemption of every firstborn son of Israel. Even though they were delivered from the destroyer that night; even though they were redeemed from Pharaoh's hand – they still lived under a deeper debt. The debt of sin that all mankind is under. As important as that redemption was – they, and we, needed another. As important as that lamb was, it couldn't erase the deeper debt of sin. And so centuries later, Jesus is in the room with His disciples celebrating the Passover meal that chapter 12 describes and they are utterly shocked at how this one goes. They've been doing this every year since they were born – they know how it goes – but it didn't go that way that night. When Jesus blesses and breaks the bread they expected to hear the traditional blessing, '***This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors suffered in the wilderness so we could be free***'.

But instead they heard, '***This is My body***'. What He was saying was 'This is the bread of My affliction that I am going to suffer for your ultimate freedom'. And then the gospels record that He takes the cup, the third cup of the meal, the cup of redemption, and they expected to hear "'***Blessed art Thou, LORD our God, King of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine***.'" But instead they hear '***This is My blood***'. Luke explains that Jesus was saying, '***This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood***'. In other words, 'That little lamb in Egypt was only enough to redeem you from that one night of judgment. ***But My blood will redeem you from the final judgment***'. We cannot ever forget that at the very heart of Christianity is a bloody sacrifice that should have been us. There is a tendency today to shy away from the image of dead lambs and bloody doorposts.

And in fact, American Christianity is far less bloody than it used to be. Songs like "Power in the Blood" or "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood" or "Are You Washed in the Blood?" may still be sung in some churches but they are fewer and fewer, and there aren't many newer songs so focused on blood. The Cross, yes; redemption, yes; but blood, rarely. We're eager to speak of life, but hesitant to speak of blood. People don't want to hear about blood – they want to hear how they can overcome the problems in their lives, they want to know how they can get out of debt, buy that new house or car. Just don't talk about the blood. We don't have the time to deal with this fully right now, but we need to understand something about the importance of blood. Blood is so important to God that it is mentioned in the Bible around 700 times.

David referred to the "***incorruptible***" blood. Peter spoke of the "***precious***" blood, and John wrote of the "***purifying***" power of the blood. Several times throughout the Bible we are told that, "***the life of the flesh is in the blood***." Hebrews tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins; Paul tells us that the blood of Christ brings us near to God; and Jesus told His disciples that unless they would eat His flesh and drink His blood they had no life in them. And then there is the overpowering imagery of daily sacrifices in the tabernacle and then in the temple with blood all over the Old Testament. Clearly God is telling something about the incredible importance blood. And here in Exodus it is the blood of a lamb, smeared on the lintel and doorposts of a house that redeems the life of the firstborn from the destroyer.

And at that Passover with Jesus and His disciples there was one more shock. At the Passover meal you had the bread, you had the four cups of wine, and then you had the lamb. ***But here there's no mention of a lamb***. And whether or not there was actually a lamb at that Passover, none of the gospel writers makes mention of it because ***the*** Lamb was at the table. At least by the time the gospels were written, these guys had got it. Jesus was saying, 'There's no lamb because that lamb is Me. The lamb your fathers killed and ate in Egypt could only accomplish deliverance from Pharaoh and redemption from destroyer. Tonight My death on the cross, My Exodus will provide the ultimate deliverance and redemption for you. That lamb could only redeem the firstborn – My blood will redeem you from the ultimate judgment. With the other lamb, you still had the debt of sin remaining on you – but I'm removing that tonight'.

One day Jesus was walking by John the Baptist, and John looks up and says, '***Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world***'. John had a revelation – ***the revelation of the Lamb***. The story of the Lamb and the history of the Lamb will do you no good unless you have a revelation of the Lamb. In other words John was saying, 'I see – now I see – the firstborn sons are not saved because we slaughter some lambs. They're saved because the Father sent His firstborn Son to shed His blood for our sins'. In the story of Abraham, God was saying 'One day I'm going to walk up this mountain with My son, My only son, and lay Him on the wood, and pick up the knife, and there's not going to be anyone to stop this sacrifice. ***Abraham, the reason your beloved son won't die is because Mine will***'.

**Abraham's story says that there is a debt that must be paid; the Passover story tells us that a substitute can pay the debt; and Jesus' story says 'I'm the substitute and I'll pay that debt'.** The whole point of the history of the lamb and the story of the lamb is to bring you to the revelation of the lamb. The story of Israel in bondage to an evil taskmaster is our story. It is meant to describe in word pictures our condition without Christ. We are not only slaves to sin, without hope in the world, but the debt of sin hangs over our heads, and we are doomed to struggle and work and die at the pleasure of an evil ruler – stuck in Egypt. The only hope of getting out of Egypt is the bloody sacrifice of a helpless victim.

The other thing the Passover tells us is that the destroyer is coming, judgment is coming and the only hope of getting out alive is the blood of the Lamb. If we shelter under the blood, this judgment cannot touch us. As Paul tells us in the book of Romans: '**There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus**'. Behold the Lamb! **We need to have a revelation of the Lamb.** Because we trust in ourselves too much, we fail to have a real appreciation for the debt of sin that hangs over our heads. Honestly, most of us don't think we're really that bad. And even if we have some, small inkling notion that we may have a small problem with a holy God, we reject the idea of a substitute because we're pretty sure we can clean up our act ourselves.

I think Thomas Watson said it best, '**Til sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet**'. The Jews always eat a dish of bitter herbs in the Passover to remind them of the bitterness of their slavery. And it is not until we have a revelation of the awful bitterness of sin, all the ugly effects of sin together with the awful end of sin, will we appreciate the sweetness of our Substitute and the immensity of our debt that He paid. Til sin be bitter, I will be a selfish husband; til sin be bitter, my days will start and end with me; til sin be bitter, idols will populate my life; til sin be bitter, I will give in to far more for far less; til sin be bitter, my days will be filled with what makes me happy; til sin be bitter, I will be my own lord.

We need a revelation of the Lamb. In 1857 Charles Spurgeon dropped by his church one Saturday as it was being remodeled, to test out the acoustics. He stood on the platform and boomed out at the top of lungs with all the feeling he could muster, "**Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. Behold the Lamb of God ...**" Way up in the rafters working far away from the platform and unable even to see it, was one of the workmen, a carpenter. As Spurgeon later recounted, this carpenter: '**...heard the words, and they came like a message from heaven to his soul. He was smitten with conviction on account of sin, put down his tools, went home, and there, after a season of spiritual struggling, found peace and life by beholding the Lamb of God**'. Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. Let us behold the Lamb.

*Our gracious God and Father,*

*We thank you for showing us this great story of Your deliverance and redemption. Grant us to see the enormity of our debt and the utter mercy of Your provision. Thank You Father, for providing a Lamb. He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; it is His blood that was spilled in our place. It is the blood of the Lamb that is the ground of all our comforts, the foundation of all our joys, the sum of all Your gospel promises and the very essence of our faith. We look with eager anticipation of the day when with all the saints and angels we will sing that new song "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise. For You were slain and with Your blood you redeemed a people from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation, and You have made them to be a kingdom of priests to serve our God, and they will reign upon the earth." Grant that we would behold the Lamb we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*