

“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” (John 1:29).

This declaration of John the Baptist went to the heart of Jesus’ mission. Beyond all else that He had come to accomplish—to reveal the character of God, to seek and to save the lost, to proclaim good tidings, and more—He had come to be the divine Sacrifice for sin.

Jesus’ very name pointed to the preeminent purpose of His ministry. Before He was born, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, who had pledged to marry Mary, and told him: “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

“Jesus” is the Greek form of Joshua, which means “the Lord saves.” Later the title “Christ” was attached to His given name; it means “the Anointed One,” that is, “the Messiah.” So when we say “Jesus Christ” we really are saying Savior-Messiah, or the Messiah who saves. Unfortunately, for millions of people today “Jesus Christ” is no more than a profanity. How little do they realize what the words really mean when they take His name in vain! Thus does the evil one, the hellish foe of Jesus in the great controversy between good and evil, seek to divert attention from the saving work of Jesus!

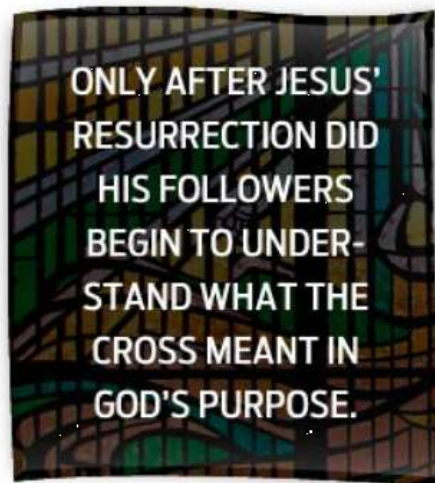
His Divine Purpose

Jesus was born to die. For almost all people death is the last, sad act in the drama of life. But not for Jesus: death was the climax of His coming to earth. By dying He would save the world. “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself,” He said (John 12:32). And also: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14, 15).

One might have expected the followers of Jesus to be ashamed of His death. Crucifixion was the worst way to die: it was a slow, agonizing execution carried out in a public place. Rome reserved it for the worst criminals; no Roman citizen could be condemned to die in this despised manner. Jesus was not a Roman citizen; He could be and was crucified. Oh, how far did the Savior stoop to win our salvation! So the apostle Paul writes: “He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:8).

The early Christians, however, were not ashamed. They never tried to cover up the manner of Jesus’ dying; they weren’t embarrassed by it; they made no excuses for it.

Rather, they proclaimed it boldly: “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed” (Acts 4:10); “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:22, 23); “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).



Ellen White explained Christ’s saving work like this:

“Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was

condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. ‘With His stripes we are healed’” (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 25).

False Expectations

The disciples of Jesus did not immediately grasp the divine purpose behind Jesus’ death. When John the Baptist, speaking with divine insight, declared, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, NKJV),* those who heard him must have been puzzled as to his meaning. Throughout Jesus’ ministry the Twelve expected Him to function as a political Messiah, one who would deliver the Jews from the yoke of the hated Romans. They found incomprehensible Jesus’ predictions of His impending sufferings and death in Jerusalem (Matt. 16:21-23; 20:17-19).

Only after Jesus’ resurrection did His followers begin to understand what the cross meant in God’s purpose. The light began to dawn on the road to Emmaus:

“He said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27).

In the light of Calvary we also see more clearly portions of the Old Testament that, without Jesus, puzzle and even trouble us.

The sanctuary services, for example: Why so much killing of innocent animals? Why so much shedding of blood? Looking back on the sacrificial system through the lens of the cross, we realize that it served a divine educational function. It taught the Israelites that sin is costly—that it is not a light matter; and that sin could be dealt with only through the taking of life, as the book of Hebrews makes explicit: “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22).

The wilderness tent and the later Temple focused salvation by grace for a particular time and place. The person who was sorry for their sins found peace by doing what the Lord had instructed, not by following a course of their own devising.

Ultimately, however, animal sacrifice could not provide atonement. “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). Only the death of the God-man Jesus Christ could deal with sins decisively. Thus, every lamb or other animal brought by the penitent as an offering was efficacious only because of the offering up of the Lamb of God, to which it pointed.

Because of Calvary we also begin to understand the amazing but perplexing story found in Genesis 22—of Abraham and his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. The account has long troubled students of the Bible, both Jewish and Christian. Here is Yahweh commanding the aged father: “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about” (verse 2).

How can a God of love issue such a command? It sounds like the words of one of the pagan deities that were worshipped by the inhabitants of Canaan. They offered up human sacrifices, but Yahweh strictly forbade the children of Israel to imitate their diabolical practices: “Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord” (Lev. 18:21).

Questions for Reflection and Sharing

1. "Jesus was born to die," according to the author. What role did His life and teachings play in His earthly ministry?
2. How does the biblical emphasis on blood sacrifices affect your twenty-first-century sensibilities? Be honest.
3. What do the words "the Lord will provide" mean to you?

The instruction must have cut Abraham like a sword in his heart. Somehow he found faith to go forward. He didn't understand, but he had walked with God for too long to disobey Him now. When the boy asked the soul-piercing question "The fire and wood are here . . . but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham replied: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Gen. 22:7, 8).

And God did provide. As Abraham raised the knife to slay his son, the angel of the Lord called him to stop. "Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns" (verse 13). It had been there all along, but the grieving father had been too overwrought to notice it.

Abraham called that place *Yahweh jireh*, which means "The Lord will provide." Nearly 1,000 years later, when King Solomon built the Temple, he placed it on that same site, Mount Moriah (2 Chron. 3:1). And about 1,000 years after that Jesus died close by.

The Lord who provided for Abraham provided for all humankind.

Finally, in light of Jesus the Lamb of God we understand the meaning of the wonderful fifty-third chapter of the book of Isaiah. Here is Someone who was "led like a lamb to the slaughter" (verse 7), who was "pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (verses 5, 6).

Friend, those sins He bore are my sins—and yours. Don't you love Him, this Jesus, this Lamb of God who died in your place?

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