

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## THE TRUE LAMB

*“Guilty, helpless, lost were we;  
blameless Lamb of God was he,  
sacrificed to set us free:  
Hallelujah, what a Savior!”*

*-Philip Bliss, “Hallelujah, What a Savior!”*

Of all the sermons Jesus ever preached, of all the miracles he ever performed, the most enduring and defining symbol of the Christian faith is the cross. Few other symbols have stood in the intersection of spirituality, art, and public controversy. In her survey of the cultural history of the cross, Robin Jensen notes that in some settings the cross denotes a sacred space, while “crosses in the public square can be perceived as communicating Christian triumphalism or religious intolerance.” Still others use the cross as a form of bodily adornment: hanging from our necks as a pendant or etched into our skin with indelible ink. Such diversity makes it easy to forget what the cross was originally designed for: an instrument of public execution. For early Christians to embrace this symbol scandalized the ancient world, with some saying that Christians are full of “sick delusions” for embracing “a senseless and crazy superstition.”

In spite of this controversy, Christians continued to look to the cross as their source of identity. As Christian writer John Stott puts it, “The fact that a cross became the Christian symbol, and that Christians stubbornly refused, in spite of the ridicule, to discard it in favor of something less offensive, can have only one explanation. It means that the centrality of the cross originated in the mind of Jesus himself. It was out of loyalty to him that his followers clung so doggedly to this sign.”

We can never truly understand Jesus apart from his cross. As we’ve already seen throughout John’s gospel, Jesus interprets the cross not as a symbol of unfortunate martyrdom, but his eternal destiny — it is the fateful “hour” that he’s alluded to all along, the day in which his glory is most fully revealed. And from the very beginning, John the Baptist introduces Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29, 35). To understand this, we have to understand the intersection of three distinct stories: the story of sin, the story of the Lamb, and the story of the cross.

### THE STORY OF SIN

“Whatever became of sin?” That was the question posed by Karl Menninger, a Christian psychiatrist in the 1970s. He predicted that in the future, our culture would jettison the word “sin” from our moral vocabulary. In its place we would explain away wrongdoing as the result of psychological trauma, social inequity, or biochemical imbalance. In some ways, he was right on the money. Writing in the wake of a national scandal, David Brooks comments:

“In centuries past, people built moral systems that acknowledged this weakness. These systems emphasized our sinfulness. They reminded people of the evil within themselves. Life was seen as an inner struggle against the selfish forces inside. . . . But we’re not Puritans anymore. We live in a society oriented around our inner wonderfulness. So when something atrocious happens, people look for some artificial, outside force that must have caused it. . . . People look for laws that can be changed so it never happens again.”

Only, here’s the catch. Our coping mechanisms aren’t working so well these days. Sure, we might not speak of “sin” outside of our religious circles. But everywhere we look, people are experiencing crippling guilt, shame, and depression. “Everyone sitting in here knows the warm wash of shame,” says Brene Brown in a now-famous TED Talk. It’s “an epidemic in our culture.” Elsewhere, literature professor Devorah Braum says that guilt is the “unassailable historic condition” for the entire human race.

Guilt and shame are not identical, mind you. Most contemporary psychologists would explain that while guilt says: “I’ve done a bad thing,” shame says: “I *am* a bad thing.” But Christianity says that both of these moral emotions can have the same source:

For our transgressions are multiplied before you,  
and our sins testify against us;  
for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities:  
transgressing, and denying the LORD,  
and turning back from following our God,  
speaking oppression and revolt,  
conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words.  
Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away;  
for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter.  
Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey.  
The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. (Isaiah 59:12-15)

Sound familiar? Isaiah’s words could just as easily have been written today. Richard Shweder, a moral psychologist, has explained that morality can be conceived of in three distinct categories. We may feel guilt when we violate the “ethics of autonomy” — that is, failing to live up to own standards. We may feel guilt when we violate the “ethics of community” — that is, failing to live up to the standards of our families or peers. But we can also feel guilt when we violate what he calls the “ethics of divinity” — moral norms that are so transcendent and universal that all cultures have boundaries when it comes to things like sexuality or bodily harm. Christianity explains why these norms are so universal. Sin isn’t merely the violation of cultural standards. It’s the “vandalism of God’s shalom,” the violation of God’s creation, God’s will, and even goodness itself.

But let’s move from the halls of modern psychology into the shadowy chambers of our own hearts. After all, it’s easy to see sin as something “out there,” in the culture. It’s a different story entirely to lift the rocks inside our soul to see the worms squiggling beneath. Just think about how you might finish this sentence for a minute: “No one would love me if. . . .” For instance, *No one would love me if they could see my internet browser history.* Or: *No one would love me if they knew what I’d done in high school.* Or: *No one would love me if they heard the voice that plays inside my head constantly.* See, no matter how good you are — or *think* you are — deep down you’re acutely aware of the things lurking in the crevices of your

own soul. Things that no one knows about. Things that you're deeply ashamed of. And things you desperately want to get rid of.

## THE STORY OF THE LAMB

When John declares Jesus to be the “Lamb of God,” he’s drawing from the rich tradition of Israel’s sacrificial system. And John’s gospel goes to great lengths to establish Jesus as the Passover Lamb. How can a lamb take away sin? According to Jewish teaching, the “life of an animal is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11). Offering the blood of an animal is meant to atone or “wipe away” the stain of sin.

Sacrificial animals may seem barbaric to modern minds. But it makes sense in light of the way human beings tend to think of right and wrong in terms of “clean” and “unclean.” Consider the famous experiment of “Hitler’s sweater.” Study participants were asked if they’d be willing to wear a sweater that had previously been worn by Adolf Hitler. Predictably, participants declined. So, they were asked if they would be willing to put on the sweater if it had been professionally cleaned. This promise made no difference on the participants’ response. But what if the sweater could be completely unraveled, and the threads cleaned and re-dyed to make a whole new sweater? Once again, participants declined so long as the material originated from the infamous “Hitler sweater.”

It's ridiculous, of course. After all, it's not as if Hitler's evil could be transferred to us just by wearing his sweater. But for the study's participants, it seems to have *felt* that way — that wearing the sweater might leave them feeling contaminated and dirty.

What if the reverse could be true? What if there could be a way for our own inner contamination to be transferred to another? What if the blood of another could literally lift away the dirt clinging to my own soul? That's the language of atonement. That's the concept of an animal offering us personal forgiveness and a clean slate.

Granted, Passover was not originally a holiday ordered around personal forgiveness. But by Jesus' day, Jewish people associated all animal sacrifices with the forgiveness of sin. So, each Passover, religious pilgrims would descend upon the city of Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in the temple. According to one Jewish historian, each year would see the sacrifice of over 250,000 Passover lambs. There was so much blood that the religious leaders had to install irrigation channels in the sacrificial altar, funneling the blood to the local brook Kidron. By the time the holiday was over, the waters were said to run a deep crimson red. Imagine what it must have been like to be a pilgrim in Jerusalem at Passover. The crowds. The smells. And the continual bleating sheep as they meet their end on a blood-stained altar.

That's precisely the destiny of Jesus Christ. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah predicted that God's true servant would take on the qualities of such a sacrifice:

<sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. <sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. <sup>6</sup>

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. (Isaiah 53:3-6)

Jesus becomes the true Lamb, the one who would become the once-for-all sacrifice who would render the former system obsolete. Jesus would absorb the stain and penalty of our sin so that we might be “healed,” and that we might experience forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace. The irony is that while the other lambs went unwillingly to the altar, Jesus goes to the cross with a bold willingness to lay down his life.

## THE STORY OF THE CROSS

It’s impossible to overstate the social impact of crucifixion in the ancient world. By the time of Jesus’ birth, the Romans had perfected this mode of crucifixion into a sadistic art form. Roman writers called it the “barren or criminal wood” and “a most cruel and disgusting punishment.” Devout Jews would have seen the cross as a symbol of God’s curse (Deuteronomy 21:23). When Spartacus was defeated after his rebellion in 71 BC, the Romans took him and 6,000 of his closest followers and crucified them on the 120-mile stretch of road leading to Rome. Josephus, the Jewish historian, reports that at one point the Romans were crucifying as many as 500 Jews per day. Crucifixion was so common, so part of the social fabric, that Jesus would very likely have witnessed crucifixions long before his eventual death. But for Jesus, the cross was no symbol of unwilling martyrdom. It was his destiny. For Jesus, the cross was where the fateful “hour” would finally come, the place where the “Son of Man” would be lifted up, and the place where the true Shepherd would lay down his life for his sheep. And, more significantly, the cross was where the true Lamb of God would give his life, and in so doing lift away the sin of mankind.

The cross is also the method the Jews choose to eliminate the threat of the rabble-rousing Jesus. Plans hatched after the resurrection of Lazarus come to fruition in an illegal, late-night trial of Jesus, one that ended with Jesus being brought before Roman authorities. Initially, the local governor Pontius Pilate seeks to mollify the Jews by having Jesus severely beaten. Mind you, this was already considerable punishment, most likely involving a flayed whip known to tear away parts of Jesus’ flesh. But it wasn’t enough. The crowds repeatedly cried for Jesus to be crucified, so Pilate agreed.

So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. (John 19:16b-18)

Crucifixion was more than just a death sentence. Crucifixion was also designed to shame you and to bring shame on your followers, to exterminate your movement before it could destabilize the peace of Rome. So, Rome chose the most public places to perform these executions so that others could behold the gruesome spectacle. Golgotha would have been a hillside just outside Jerusalem’s walls, and John records that Jesus carried his cross to the site. He wouldn’t have carried the full cross, but the horizontal cross-beam called the *patibulum*, where it would be fitted against the vertical *stipes* at the place of execution. Most likely this wasn’t the first time the Romans had chosen this fateful site for a public execution.

Contrary to renaissance paintings, crucifixion was typically performed by nailing the victim through the wrists and shins rather than the hands and feet directly. But medical experts remind us that this would have been all the more agonizing, especially as the nail makes contact with the ulnar nerve inside the forearm. And in the stress position of the cross, victims would have to forcibly drag their body up the harsh wood of the cross to draw each breath. Roman crosses were occasionally fitted with a small cross-beam between the victim's legs designed to help them breathe — but this would only prolong the dying person's misery.

Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written." (John 19:19-22)

To add to the victim's shame, the Romans would attach a placard or *titulus* to their cross, or hang it around their necks. The point was to mock them further, as well as deter others from repeating the crime. Pilate attaches an inscription to Jesus' cross (most likely on the upper part of the vertical beam) identifying him as King of the Jews — using every language in the Roman Empire. It comes as a small irony, since it has the added benefit of being true. When the Jews seek to amend this detail, Pilate seems fed up.

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, "They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." (John 19:23-24a)

Roman soldiers were jaded, as was the general public. Crucifixions were known to attract crowds who would cruelly mock the victim, and Roman soldiers would become inventive in how they treated the condemned. Here, we find the soldiers gambling for who gets Jesus' clothes, though John reminds his readers that this, too, is a fulfillment of Scripture (Psalm 22).

So the soldiers did these things, but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19:24b-27)

John pairs the cruelty of the soldiers with the compassion of Jesus himself. Presumably, Jesus' father Joseph had already passed away. So, he takes great care in naming John as Mary's new son. This illustrates the new social dimensions present in the kingdom of God, as well as establishing the fact that John is the only one of the disciples who has not utterly fled the presence of the crucified Messiah.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch

and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:28-30)

For the condemned, death would not come quickly. Medical studies have tried to ascertain the precise cause of death in crucifixion. Most conclude that slow, painful asphyxiation would have been common, though severe blood loss and other trauma could easily bring death as well. Jesus remains faithful until the very end. "I thirst" may be a simple statement of his human needs showing through. Or, it could be John's version of Jesus' cry of forsakenness. After all, in John's gospel, water symbolizes the Holy Spirit. And when Jesus dies, he gives up his spirit (19:30). The sequence may be off, but this could be an admission that his death is near.

Sour wine may have contained drugs to dull the pain of the crucified — one of few mercies extended to the condemned. After Jesus accepts this offering, he declares: "It is finished!" after which he breathes his last.

John's Greek is notable, here. The phrase "it is finished" comes from a single Greek verb. The perfect tense underscores Jesus' completed mission, and that his once-for-all sacrifice has been made. More specifically, the debt for sin has been paid, and Jesus has secured his people's forgiveness.

Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. (John 19:31-32)

Romans and Jews existed in something of a delicate balance. Since it was Sabbath, the Romans would appease the Jews by completing the executions more quickly so the bodies would not remain past sundown. So, the Romans would come and deliberately break the legs of the victims, preventing them from rising to breathe and hastening their death.

But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness--his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth--that you also may believe. For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." And again another Scripture says, "They will look on him whom they have pierced."

John adds this small detail to once again connect us back to the lambs of Passover, whose legs traditionally remained unbroken.

John also adds another detail. To prove conclusively that Jesus had truly died, a Roman soldier pierces Jesus' side with a spear. Out from the wound flow blood and water. Again, medical experts see this as evidence of the separation of the pericardial fluid and the pleural effusion from Jesus' chest cavity, leaving little room regarding the fact of Jesus' death. But the moment may have added significance. Jesus' blood cleanses us from sin, while the water reminds us of new life in the Holy

Spirit. With the water and the blood we experience healing and renewal. And with the finished work of Christ we experience a new way of living.

## YOUR STORY

These three stories — of sin, the Lamb, and the cross — weave together in perfect harmony, but they mean very little until they intersect with your story — and mine. Here is a solemn truth: that there is nothing you've ever done that that's so good that the cross of Jesus Christ is unnecessary. And there is nothing that you've ever done that's so bad that the cross if Jesus Christ is insufficient. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God dies. And when he does, sin is taken away, and God's righteous judgment falls on Jesus and not us. The all-surpassing scandal of the cross is that God displays mercy through the death of his Son.

Because, in the end, each of our stories will be defined by one of three things: the things that we have done, the things others have done *to* us, or what Christ has done *for* us. Only, here's the electrifying good news of the gospel. What Christ has achieved for us has been completed. It's done forever. And his finished work carries the promise of total, eternal renewal. Jesus Christ is Savior of the world (John 3:16). The real question is...is he yours?