

“Who Takes Away”

John 1:29

Lent Midweek III

March 6, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The text for our entire Lenten midweek meditation: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Tonight, our focus is on the phrase, “who takes away.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Perhaps the most misunderstood, or at least the most underappreciated, words of this beloved proclamation we are considering this Lenten series are the three words “who takes away.” The rest of the words in this proclamation are so big, so important, it’s easy to get caught up in their weight: “Lamb of God” – last week, we considered how central that is to all of eternity! On the other end of the proclamation, “the sin of the world” – so weighty and full of meaning that we will actually have to break it into two sermons! In the middle of such heavy phrases, indeed tying together such heavy phrases (so that we often speed right through the ‘knot’ that ties together the ends)... in the middle are those seemingly ‘less weighty’ words “who takes away.” It’s as if we have learned to think of it as: **“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”**

But, if we have learned it that way, it's to our great detriment. And we do well tonight to just focus on those three "little" words that tie together everything else. Why do we underappreciate or misunderstand them as we do?

Perhaps it's because we think that God taking away sins is easy; He simply says, "Okay, the sins are gone." Isn't that how we sometimes think of it? – that God hears our repentance, our sadness melts his heart, and He says, "There, there; don't cry. Your hurt feelings are worse than the sin. Look, I've already forgotten about it; made it all better. Now, let's dry your tears."

And, if that's your view of it, that God simply wipes away the sin because he sees how bad you feel about it, if that's your view, you are going to hell. No, you didn't mishear me. You will end up in hell if you believe that a doting grandfather in the sky just wipes away sin because he thinks you're so adorable and just loves you so much.

In other words, we should stop and notice the first word of our little three-word phrase tonight, that word being "who." *Who* takes away? That word "who" points back to someone, but it's not a doting grandfather; it's not a generic deity; it's not even (your *proper* understanding of) the heavenly Father.

This might be a stunning thought to us when we're actually asked to consider it. Don't the Scriptures say that God in

heaven forgives sin? Isn't the economy of forgiveness that (as the psalmist says of God), "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us"? Doesn't God say through the prophet Jeremiah, "I will remember their sins and lawless deeds no more"? Yes! He says all of that! But, based on what?

You see, we just want to focus on the notion of "forgiveness." But forgiveness depends upon "atonement." A debt is not simply 'forgiven' in the sense of being forgotten and not needing to be accounted for in the ledger. (Consider how our government tries that concept with our national debt – let's just 'say' it's forgiven, that we can just 'write it off.' No, debt needs to be accounted for; the scales need to be balanced.)

In other words, we misunderstand the term "takes away" sin. We want it to simply mean that God just benevolently says, "You know what? Forget about it. I'm over it." But, if that's so, then we're really expecting that God is no longer holy and just, no longer has divine weigh scales that need to be balanced... that God has just declared that his holiness is passe, no longer fashionable... that 'his great love for us' is trying to hide his righteous demand as if an embarrassing reminder of His 'angry, hot-tempered, judgmental past.' We want his forgiveness to put the blame on himself for his righteousness and to wipe away – not

our sin – but his holiness. In other words, we sinners want God to blame himself, rather than us... to call himself to repentance for his holiness, rather than call us to repentance for our unholiness. Indeed, when our concept of “forgiveness” does not include balancing the scales of divine justice, it actually puts the blame on God!

But, here stands that word “who.” And the word does not refer generically to a God who has decided just to ignore and wipe out sin. Rather, the word “who” is a reference back to the Lamb of God who was laid on the altar to balance the scales. *There* is what – or “who” – our definition of forgiveness so often forgets. It forgets Christ at the center. It forgets Christ as the “knot” that ties the two ends together – God and man are reconciled in Christ, and only in Christ. Without Christ crucified, the economy of forgiveness and divine love is always incomplete, never adds up, is always unbalanced, and man twists it all to put the blame on God.

But, God in his holiness knew that the blame and all of the unrighteousness of sin and all of the pending doom of condemnation, it all was to fall on man. That, the holy God could not simply “wipe away” and forget. Who takes it away? Not, precisely speaking, God in some sense of generic benevolence. More precisely, the Lamb of God takes it away, in his substitutionary sacrifice. Apart from the historic truth *that* image

(cross on the wall) represents, there is no “taking away” of anything, for – as Leviticus and Hebrews say – under God’s law, everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

And, thus, it’s not really a “taking away” of sin as much as it’s the Lamb of God “taking upon himself” the sin. In fact, in the Greek, the word is ἀίρω... it *can* be translated ‘to remove or take away;’ but, much more commonly it is used to mean “to bear up, to lift.” For example, it’s the word used when Satan tempts Jesus by saying he could throw himself off the temple and the angels would “bear him up” and not let him be harmed. It’s also the same verb used when Jesus tells the lame man to stand, *take up* his mat, and go home. So then, even when it is translated “to remove or take away”, the implication is that something is taken away precisely by taking it up upon one’s self and bearing its weight until it is removed.

Now, one could say, “Gee, Pastor, you’re putting a lot of stock in technical definitions. Are we really comfortable having the “how” of our salvation depend upon how a Greek word is interpreted?” Answer: Such theology/interpretation of our salvation is not dependent merely on a lifeless linguistic definition, but rather the word’s definition is further informed by the Scriptural record – for Scripture interprets Scripture. And,

what do we see from earlier in Scripture? What was the teaching illustration, the near sacramental foreshadowing, of sin being taken away? How did *God himself* institute and command that it be shown and taught?

In Exodus, the Lord told Moses, “You shall take [...] the ram, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the ram, you shall kill the ram and take its blood and throw it against the sides of the altar... And Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram... with which atonement was made at their ordination and consecration.”

And it wasn’t just Aaron, wasn’t just the priests, for which this atonement and the transfer of sins upon the sacrificial animal was made. In the very first verses of Leviticus, the very first ‘law’ or practice God has Moses institute for the people is this:

“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord... If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish... He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.’”

In short, it will *take upon itself* the sinner’s sins. And, not just rams, but – in the Old Covenant, bulls and goats. In Leviticus, we read the Lord command,

“Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall

kill the bull as a sin offering for himself... Then he shall take the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring *its* blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat... Thus he shall make atonement... because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins.”

And yet, despite all this Old Covenant practice, the hymn well confesses,

“Not all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars slain could give the guilty conscience peace or wash away the stain.

But Christ, the heav’nly Lamb, takes all our sins away; a sacrifice of nobler name and richer blood than they.

My faith would lay its hand on that dear head of thine, while as a penitent I stand, and there confess my sin.

Indeed, the whole sacrificial history points forward to the cross, not to a mere erasing of debt, a mere ignoring of transgression, a mere ‘taking away’ of judgment... but a transference of *your* sin onto the head and back of Christ Jesus, so that, as Isaiah famously records it, “upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace... the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Knowing that it’s your sin for which Christ died, it’s your sin that was laid on his head... that may perhaps prick at the heart and burden the conscience. Ironic, really, that we would not be

burdened in sins against God, but we *would* be burdened that our sins caused Jesus to suffer. Why do we 21<sup>st</sup> century sinners worry more about Jesus' pain than we do about God's holiness? To be sure, it's proper to sympathize with people in their suffering, but is that all the death of Christ is about? Is it just about a man suffering in our place and we feel bad about him hurting instead of us?

No, the death of Christ is the holy God's remedy to your sin. And if the holy God devised and designed that remedy, and if the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, if God himself carried out that remedy, then you are beneficiary of that remedy! You can weep with long faces all you want that Jesus suffered for your sins, but your tears don't make his suffering more worth it. He willingly went to the cross as the Lamb of God... He knew what was at stake, He knew the plan of salvation, all its sacrificial-system foreshadowings, and the eternal importance of its fulfillment, and He willingly took all of it upon his head – all of it was transferred to the head of the Substitute – and He bore it all, that the holy God might be justified *and* the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Thus, you now may have a free and clear conscience. It all has been taken up, and thus it all has been taken away, and you can have a clear conscience.



“Not all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars slain could give the guilty conscience peace or wash away the stain.

But Christ, the heav’nly Lamb, takes” it all away... takes it all upon himself and removes it from before God’s judgment seat. And gives the guilty conscience peace.

Or, as the letter to the Hebrews says it, “He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls ... sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, **purify our consciences...**”

Yes, a clean conscience before the holy God; that’s yours in Christ Jesus, who – as the letter to the Hebrews continues – “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to **put away sin** by the sacrifice of himself.” He’s put away sin – not merely whitewashed it or ignored it, but taken it up, paid for it, and thus cancelled the debt. *And*, the epistle says, he will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save (deliver) those who are eagerly awaiting him.

So, what is left to do, but eagerly await him?... with a clear conscience, to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the eternal

sacrifice and proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again... to gather at the altar of God and let faith rightly rejoice in the depth of the proclamation regarding the Lamb of God who took upon himself and thereby "takes away" the sin of the world.

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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