

# The Lamb of God: The Great Atonement

*Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world! – John 1:29*

Great and marvellous are the works of the LORD God almighty! We live in the midst of them, and the little impression they make upon us, sufficiently proves our depravity. He is great in the very smallest; and there is not a plant, flower, or insect, but bears the signature of infinite wisdom and power. How sensibly then should we be affected by the consideration of the Whole, if sin had not blinded our understandings, and hardened our hearts! In the beginning, when all was dark, unformed, and waste, His powerful Word produced light, life, beauty, and order. He commanded the sun to shine, and the planets to roll. The immensity of creation is far beyond the reach of our conceptions. The innumerable stars, the worlds, which however large in themselves, are, from their remoteness, but barely visible, to us are of little more immediate, and known use, than to enlarge our idea of the greatness of their Author. Small, indeed, is the knowledge we have of our own system; but we know enough to render our indifference inexcusable. The glory of the sun must strike every eye, and in this enlightened age, there are few persons, but have some ideas of the magnitude of the planets, and the rapidity, and regularity of their motions. Farther, the rich variety which adorns this lower creation, the dependence and relation of the several parts, and their general subservience to the accommodation of man, the principal inhabitant, together with the preservation of individuals, and the continuance of every species of animals, are subjects, not above the reach of common capacities, and which afford almost endless and infinite scope for reflection and admiration. But the bulk of mankind regard them not. The vicissitudes of day and night, and of the revolving seasons, are, to them, matters of course; as if they followed each other without either cause or design. And though the philosophers, who, professedly, attach themselves to the study of the works of nature, are overwhelmed by the traces of a wisdom and arrangement, which they are unable to comprehend; yet few of them are led to reverential thoughts of God, by their boasted knowledge of His creatures. Thus men live without God in the world, though they live, and move, and have their being in Him, and are incessantly surrounded, by the most striking proofs of His presence and energy. Perhaps an earthquake, or a hurricane, by awakening their fears, may force upon their minds a conviction of His power over them, and excite an occasional momentary application to Him; but when they think the danger over, they relapse into their former stupidity.

What can engage the attention, or soften the obduracy, of such creatures? Behold, one wonder more, greater than all the former; the last, the highest effect of divine goodness! God has so loved rebellious, ungrateful sinners, as to appoint them a Saviour in the person of His only Son. The prophets foresaw His manifestation in the flesh, and foretold the happy consequences -- that His presence would change the wilderness into a fruitful field, that He was coming to give sight to the blind, and life to the dead; to set the captive at liberty; to unloose the heavy burden; and to bless the weary with rest. But this change was not to be wrought merely by a word of power, as when He said, Let there be light, and there was light (Genesis 1:3) It was great, to speak the world from nothing; but far greater, to redeem sinners from misery. The salvation, of which He is the Author, though free to us, must cost Him dear. Before the mercy of God can be actually dispensed to such offenders, the rights of His justice, the demands of His law, and the

honour of His government, must be provided for. The early institution and long continued use, of sacrifices, had clearly pointed out the necessity of an atonement; but the real and proper Atonement could only be made by MESSIAH. The blood of slaughtered animals could not take away sin, nor display the righteousness of God in pardoning it. This was the appointed, covenanted work of MESSIAH, and He alone could perform it. With this view He had said, Lo I come (Psalm 40:7) . And it was in this view, when John saw Him, that he pointed Him out to his disciples, saying, Behold the Lamb of God!

### Three points offer to our consideration

I. The title here given to MESSIAH, The Lamb of God.

II. The efficacy of His sacrifice, He takes away sin.

III. The extent of it, The sin of the world

### The Title Given to Messiah, The Lamb of God

He is the Lamb of God. The paschal lamb, and the lambs which were daily offered, morning and evening, according to the law of Moses, were of God's appointment; but this Lamb was, likewise, of His providing. The others were but types [prophetic symbols]. Though many, they were all insufficient to cleanse the offerers from guilt (Hebrews 10:1) ; and they were all superseded, when MESSIAH, by the one offering of Himself, once for all, made an end of sin, and brought in an everlasting righteousness, in favour of all who believe in His name.

This title, therefore, The Lamb of God, refers to His voluntary substitution for sinners, that by His sufferings and death, they who deserved to die, might obtain eternal life through Him, and for His sake. Mankind were universally chargeable with transgression of the law of God, and were in a state of alienation from Him. A penalty, in case of disobedience, was annexed to the law they had broken; to which, they, as offenders, were therefore obnoxious. Though it would be presumptuous in such worms as we are, to determine, upon principles of our own, whether the sovereign Judge of the universe could, consistently with His own glory, remit this penalty without satisfaction, or not; yet, since He has favoured us with a revelation of His will upon this point, we may speak more confidently, and affirm that it was not consistent with His truth and holiness, and that of His moral government to do it, because this is His own declaration. We may now be assured, that the forgiveness of one sinner, and, indeed, of one sin, by an act of mere mercy, and without any interposing consideration, was incompatible with the inflexibility of the law, and the truth and justice of the Lawgiver. But mercy designed the forgiveness of innumerable sinners, each of them charged with innumerable sins. And the declaration, that God is thus merciful, was to be recorded and publicly known, through a long succession of ages, and to extend to sins not yet committed. An act of grace so general and unreserved, might lead men (not to speak of superior intelligences) to disparaging thoughts of the holiness of God, and might even encourage them to sin with hope of impunity, if not connected with some provision, which might show, that the exercise of His mercy was in full harmony with the honour of all His perfections. How God could be just, and yet justify those whom His own righteous constitution condemned, was a difficulty too great for finite understandings to solve (Romans 3:26) But herein is God glorious. His wisdom propounded, and His love afforded, the adequate, the only possible expedient. He revealed to our first parents His purpose, which in the fulness of time He accomplished, of sending forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem sinners from the curse of the law (Galatians 4:4, 5) , by sustaining it for them. Considering the dignity of His person, and the perfection of His obedience, His sufferings and death for sins not His own, displayed the heinousness of sin, and the severe displeasure of God against it, in a much

stronger light, than the execution of the sentence upon the offenders could possibly do. It displays, likewise, the justice of this sentence, since neither the dignity, nor the holiness of the Surety, could exempt Him from suffering; and that though He was the Beloved of God, He was not spared. This is what I understand by atonement and satisfaction for sin.

## The Efficacy of His sacrifice, He takes away sin

The efficacy of this Atonement is complete. The Lamb of God, thus slain, takes away sin; both with respect to its guilt, and its defilement. The Israelites, by looking to the brazen serpent (Numbers 21:9) , were saved from death and healed of their wounds. The Lamb of God is an object, proposed not to our bodily sight, but to the eye of the mind, which indeed, in fallen man, is naturally blind; but the Gospel message, enlivened by the powerful agency of the Holy Spirit, is appointed to open it. He who thus sees the Son, and believes on Him (John 6:40) , is delivered from guilt and condemnation, is justified from all sin. He is warranted to plead the sufferings of the Lamb of God in bar of his own; the whole of the Saviour's obedience unto death, as the ground and title of his acceptance unto life. Guilt or obnoxiousness to punishment being removed, the soul has an open way of access to God, and is prepared to receive blessings from Him. For as the sun, the fountain of light, fills the eye that was before blind, the instant it receives sight; so God, who is the Fountain of Goodness, enlightens all His intelligent creatures according to their capacity, unless they are blinded by sin, and rendered incapable of communion with Him. The Saviour is now received and enthroned in the heart, and from His fulness, the life of grace is derived and maintained. Thus not only the guilt, but the love of sin, and its dominion, are taken away, subdued by grace, and cordially [sincerely] renounced by the believing, pardoned sinner. The blood, which frees him from distress, preserves a memory of the great danger and misery, from which he has been delivered, warm upon his heart; inspires him with gratitude to his Deliverer; and furnishes with an abiding constraining motive, for cheerful and universal obedience.

## The extent of it, The sin of the world

The designed extent of this gratuitous removal of sin, by the oblation of the Lamb of God, is expressed in a large and indefinite manner. He takes away the sin of the world. Many of my hearers need not be told, what fierce and voluminous disputes have been maintained, concerning the extent of the death of Christ. I am afraid the advantages of such controversies, have not been answerable to the zeal of the disputants. For myself, I wish to be known, by no name, but that of a Christian; and implicitly to adopt no system but the Bible. I usually endeavour to preach to the heart and the conscience, and to wave [avoid], as much as I can, all controversial points. But as the subject now lies directly before me, I shall embrace the occasion, and simply, and honestly, open to you the sentiments of my heart concerning it.

If it be inferred that He actually designed and intended the salvation of all men, because the death of Christ is here said to take away the sin of the world, or, (as this Evangelist expresses it in another place) the whole world (I John 2:2) , such an inference would be contradicted by fact. For it is certain that all men will not be saved (Matthew 7:13, 14) It is to be feared, that the greater part of those, to whom the Word of His salvation is sent, perish in their sins. If, therefore, He cannot be disappointed of His purpose, since many do perish, it could not be His fixed design, that all men should be finally and absolutely saved.

The exceeding great number, once dead in trespasses and sins, who shall be found on His right hand, at the great Day of His appearance, are frequently spoken of in appropriate and peculiar language. They are styled His sheep (John 10:11, 16) , for whom He laid down His life; His elect (Mark 13:27) , His own (John 13:1) ; those to whom it is given to believe in His name (Philippians

1:29) , and, concerning whom, it was the Father's good pleasure to predestinate them to the adoption of children (Eph. 1:5) By nature, they are children of wrath, even as others (Ephesians 2:3) ; and no more disposed in themselves to receive the truth, than those who obstinately and finally reject it. Whenever they become willing they are made so, in a day of divine power (Psalm 110:3) ; and wherein they differ, it is grace that makes them to differ (I Corinthians 4:7) Passages in the Scriptures to this purpose, are innumerable; and though much ingenuity has been employed to soften them, and to make them speak the language of an hypothesis, they are so plain in themselves, that he who runs may read. It is not the language of conjecture, but of inspiration, that they whom the Lord God did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29) . And though some serious persons perplex themselves with needless and painful reasonings, with respect to the sovereignty of God in His conduct towards mankind, they all, if truly spiritual and enlightened, stand upon this very ground, in their own experience. Many, who seem to differ from us in the way of argumentation, perfectly accord with us, when they simply speak of what God has done for their souls. They know, and acknowledge as readily as we, that they were first found of Him when they sought Him not; and that otherwise, they neither should, nor could, have sought Him at all; nor can they give any better reason than this, why they are saved out of the world. That it pleased the LORD to make them His people (I Samuel 12:22)

But, on the other hand, I cannot think the sense of the expression is sufficiently explained, by saying, That the world, and the whole world, is spoken of, to teach us, that the sacrifice of The Lamb of God was not confined, like the Levitical offerings, to the nation of Israel only; but that it is available for the sins of a determinate number of persons, called the Elect , who are scattered among many nations, and found, under a great variety of states and circumstances in human life. This is, undoubtedly, the truth, so far as it goes; but not, I apprehend, fully agreeable to the Scriptural manner or representation. That there is an election of grace, we are plainly taught; yet, it is not said, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save the Elect, but that He came to save sinners, to seek and to save them that are lost (I Timothy 1:15; Luke 19:10) . Upon this ground, I conceive that ministers have a warrant to preach the Gospel to every creature, and to address the conscience of every man in the sight of God: and that every person who hears this Gospel, has thereby a warrant, an encouragement, yea, a command, to apply to Jesus Christ for salvation. And that they who refuse, thereby exclude themselves, and perish, not because they never had, nor possibly could have any interest in His atonement, but, simply, because they will not come unto Him that they may have life. I know something of the cavils and curious reasonings which obtain upon this subject, and I know I may be pressed with difficulties, which I cannot resolve to the full satisfaction of enquiring and speculative spirits. I am not disheartened, by meeting with some things, beyond the grasp of my scanty powers, in a book, which I believe to be inspired by Him, whose ways and thoughts are higher than ours, as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isaiah 55:8, 9) But, I believe, that vain reasonings, self-will, an attachment to names and parties, and a disposition to draw our sentiments from human systems, rather than to form them by a close and humble study of the Bible, with prayer for divine teaching, are the chief sources of our perplexities and disputes.

The extent of Atonement is frequently represented, as if a calculation had been made, how much suffering was necessary for the Surety to endure, in order to exactly expiate the aggregate number of all the sins, of all the Elect; that so much He suffered precisely, and no more; and that when this requisition was completely answered, He said, It is finished, bowed His head, and gave up the ghost (John 19:30) But this nicety of computation does not seem analogous to that unbounded magnificence and grandeur, which overwhelms the attentive mind, in the contemplation of the divine conduct of the natural world. When God waters the earth, He waters it abundantly (Psalm 65:10) . He does not restrain the rain to cultivated, or improvable spots, but, with a profusion of bounty worthy of Himself, His clouds pour down water, with equal abundance, upon the barren mountain, the lonely desert, and the pathless ocean. Why may we

not say with the Scripture, that Christ died to declare the righteousness of God (Romans 3:25, 26), to manifest that He is just in justifying the ungodly, who believe in Jesus? And for anything we know to the contrary, the very same display of the evil and demerit of sin, by the Redeemer's agonies and death, might have been equally necessary, though the number of the Elect were much smaller, than it will appear to be, when they shall all meet before the throne of glory. If God had formed this earth for the residence of one man only; had it been His pleasure to afford him the same kind and degree of light which we enjoy; the same glorious sun, which is now sufficient to enlighten and comfort the millions of mankind, would have been necessary for the accommodation of that one person. So, perhaps, had it been His pleasure to save but one sinner, in a way that should give the highest possible discovery of His justice, and of His mercy, this could have been done by no other method, than that which He has chosen for the salvation of the innumerable multitudes, who will, in the Great Day, unite in the song of praise, to the Lamb who loved them, and washed them from their sins in His own blood. As the sun has a sufficiency of light for the eyes, (if there were so many capable of beholding it) equal in number to the leaves on the trees, and the blades of grass that grow upon the earth; so in Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, there is plenteous Redemption, He is rich in mercy to all that call upon Him (Psalm 130:7; Romans 10:12); and He invites sinners, without exception, to whom the Word of His salvation is sent, even to the ends of the earth, to look unto Him, that they may be saved (Isaiah 45:22)

Under the Gospel dispensation, and by it, God commands all men, everywhere, to repent (Acts 17:30). All men, therefore, everywhere, are encouraged to hope for forgiveness, according to the constitution prescribed by the Gospel; otherwise repentance would be both impracticable and unavailing. And therefore, the command to repent, implies a warrant to believe in the name of Jesus, as taking away the sin of the world. Let it not be said, that to call upon men to believe, which is an act beyond their natural power, is to mock them. There are prescribed means for the obtaining of faith, which it is not beyond their natural power to comply with, if they are not wilfully obstinate. We have the Word of God for our authority. God cannot be mocked (Galatians 6:7), neither doth He mock His creatures. Our Lord did not mock the young Ruler, when He told him, that if he would sell his possession upon earth, and follow Him, he should have treasure in Heaven (Luke 18:22) Had this Ruler no power to sell his possessions? I doubt not, but that he himself, thought he had power to sell them if he pleased. But while he loved his money better than he loved Christ, and preferred earthly treasures to heavenly, he had no will to part with them. And a want of will, in a moral agent, is a want of power in the strongest sense. Let none presume to offer such excuses to their Maker, as they would not accept in their own concerns. If you say of a man, he is such a liar that he cannot speak a word of truth; so profane that he cannot speak without an oath; so dishonest that he cannot omit one opportunity of cheating or stealing; do you speak of his disability to do good, as an extenuation, and because you think it renders him free of blame? Surely you think the more he is disinclined to do good; and habituated to evil, the worse he is. A man that can speak lies and perjury, that can deceive and rob, but is such an enemy to truth and goodness, that he can do nothing that is kind or upright, must be a shocking character indeed! Judge not more favourably of yourself if you can love the world and sensual pleasure, but cannot love God. If you can fear a worm like yourself, but live without the fear of God; if you can boldly trample upon His laws, but will not, and therefore cannot humble yourself before Him, and seek His mercy, in the way of His appointment. We cannot ascribe too much to the grace of God; but we should be careful, that under a semblance of exalting His grace, we do not furnish the slothful and unfaithful with excuses for their wilfulness and wickedness (Matthew 25:16). God is gracious; but let man be justly responsible for his own evil, and not presume to state his case so, as would, by just consequence, represent the holy God as being the cause of sin, which He hates and forbids.

The whole may be summed up in two points, which I commend to your serious attention; which it must be the business of my life to enforce, and which, I trust, I shall not repent of having

enforced, either at the hour of death, or in the Day of Judgment, when I must give an account of my preaching, and you of what you have heard in this place.

1. That salvation is, indeed, wholly of grace. The gift of a Saviour, the first dawn of light into the heart, all the supports and supplies needful for carrying on the work, from the foundation to the top-stone, all is of free grace.

2. That now the Lamb of God is preached to you, as taking away the sin of the world, if you reject Him, which may the Lord forbid! I say, if you reject Him, your blood will be upon your own head. You are warned, you are invited. Dare not to say, Why doth He yet find fault, for who hath resisted His will? (Romans 9:19) . If He will save me, I shall be saved; if not, what can I do? God is merciful, but He is also holy and just; He is almighty, but His infinite power is combined with wisdom, and regulated by the great designs of His government. He can do, innumerable things, which, He will not do. What He will do (so far as we are concerned) His Word informs us, and not one jot or tittle thereof shall fail (Matthew 5:18)



## John Newton

John Newton (1725 – 1807) was a sailor, preacher, and hymnwriter who was a leader of the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. He is known for his conversion to Christ after a career in the slave trade and the hymn 'Amazing Grace'.

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