

John 1:19-34 “Behold the Lamb of God”

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Last week we started a journey through John's account of the good news about Jesus. John told us that he was writing so that we would see Jesus as truly God and as truly come to show God to us. In the words of writer Glenn Scrivener, Jesus is everything God wants to say to the world wrapped up in a person. John's writing so that we may know that word made flesh.

Trust him as our savior. Find life as it was meant to be living in and with him. In his prologue that we looked at last week, John the beloved disciple mentions another John.

We often call him John the Baptist. He baptized a lot of people. But he tells us two things about John. One, he was not the light.

[1 : 19] The word made flesh. God come to us. He was not that. And two, God sent him to witness to the light.

So as I pick up our reading at verse 19 of chapter 1, notice both of those things in this passage. Notice John not the light.

And then John's testimony, his witness to the light. John 1 and verse 19. And this is the testimony of John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who are you?

He confessed and did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Are you Elijah? He said, I am not. Are you the prophet?

And he answered, No. So they said to him, Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? He said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

[2 : 26] Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, Then why are you baptizing if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?

And John answered them, I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. Even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.

These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. And the next day, he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me. I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.

And John bore witness. I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

[3 : 42] And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God. Let's pray together. God, thank you for this testimony to Jesus as the Lamb of God.

Help us that we might see Jesus. Help us see how much we need Jesus. God, by your Spirit, overcome the weaknesses of this one who speaks, that we might hear your voice and know you more.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Imagine for a moment that you're a spotlight operator for the Broadway musical Les Mis.

You're standing up in the dark shadows above the stage as the play goes on and Jean Valjean, the star of the show, begins to agonize internally through the song, Who Am I?

Will he jeopardize his future and that of many others by admitting his criminal past? The tension is building, and as the song nears its end, Jean Valjean steps into the perfectly cast, spotlight.

[5 : 14] He rips open his shirt to reveal his prison number, and he sings, Who Am I? Two, four, six, oh, one.

And the crowd goes wild. He nailed it. It was amazing. Everything went just right, and the show gets a standing ovation at the end of the night.

Following the show, the cast and the crew, they go shower and change, and they start to file out one by one towards a press room, and you're one of the first ones out.

You didn't have a lot to change, you know? But an eager reporter mistakes you for the actor playing Jean Valjean. He begins gushing admiration to you.

What an amazing performance. That scene at the end of Who Am I? Man, you just nailed it. It was so powerful. Tell me how it felt. And the shutters are flashing in your face, and the mics are being crammed in front of you.

[6 : 15] And you could really enjoy that moment, couldn't you? That's one option you have. You could say, Well, yeah, it really was great. I nailed it. Just the way we rehearsed it.

After all, you may be thinking, if I didn't get that spotlight right, they would have never seen the emotion on his face. They never would have been able to see the number on his chest.

They would have missed the whole grand moment if it weren't for me. I deserve my time in the spotlight here. You might respond that way.

Or you could respond, Hey guys, you know, the guy you're looking for, he's not out here yet. It really was a great scene.

I've never seen anyone do it like our guy. And as spotlight operator, it was a delight to play my role so that everyone could see the agony on Valjean's face and appreciate the emotion of that moment.

[7 : 20] He really is an amazing performer. You should be talking to him. He'll be out in just a minute. Do you hear the voice of John the Baptist in that second response?

People are clamoring around John, right? There's excitement attracting a crowd here. Even more people come in this passage to talk about him.

They want to know who he is. John says, You know, actually, the one you're looking for, he's not out here yet. But as a spotlight operator, it's a delight to play my role so you can all see him well. He is so amazing. You should be talking to him. Is that how most people with crowds and cameras around them respond these days? Is that normal?

When there's lots of excitement around you and people are clamoring to know more about you, we live in a celebrity culture, don't we? And that's all around us. It's come into the church quite strongly.

[8 : 27] Even subtly, perhaps, into our own hearts this morning, being the center of attention, the one in the spotlight. Pastor Rico Tice says, this passage helps us see that we need fewer movie stars and more spotlights.

In the church especially, fewer movie stars and more spotlights. We need pastors and leaders and church members who are delighted to be spotlight operators rather than play the starring role, don't we?

I want to try to cooperate with spotlight operator John who is telling us that the point is to start with Jesus.

This passage is about appreciating the star in the spotlight, not primarily about operating a spotlight better, okay? That's part of what I'm hoping to help us see this morning.

We're going to reflect back at the end on ourselves as spotlight operators. But first, let's focus on the star in the spotlight. After brushing off question after question about himself, John says, the really awesome guy is coming.

[9 : 43] And the next day, sure enough, he sees Jesus. And he tells us where our eyes need to be looking. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This is the one, John says. Look at him. Listen to him. The Lamb of God is the one who dies in your place so that you can live.

John may have been thinking of the story that Derek mentioned earlier where Abraham tells Isaac that God himself will provide the Lamb to die in place of Isaac so that he can live.

God will send that Lamb. Then there's the Passover Lamb who is killed, whose blood is shed so that when you put it on the doorposts of your house, the firstborn son in that home will live because the Lamb died.

Lambs sacrificed morning and night over and over for centuries for the sins of God's people. Perhaps John remembers the Lamb of Isaiah 53 who is led to the slaughter because the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

[11:10] Over and over and over. Do you hear it through the whole Old Testament? The Lamb of God dies so that someone else can live.

Isn't it remarkable how in the very first introduction of Jesus here, his cross, we don't get the word cross here, but we know how he will die. It's already in view.

That's how central Jesus' substitutionary death in our place is in his mission here on earth. As the word made flesh, we've already heard, so that we might become children of God.

How's that going to happen? Pastor A.W. Pink writes of the crowds that would have cheered a conquering Messiah king. He says, they would have welcomed him on the throne, but they must first accept him on the altar.

What the world needs first and foremost is the Christ of the cross where the Lamb of God offered himself as a sacrifice for sin. See, when John draws your attention to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, if you don't have a sin problem, you don't really need to behold him, do you?

[12:30] He's not all that important to you. If that's what he comes to do is take away the sin of the world and you don't have any, don't need to look very long. Increasingly, in our day, no one, or maybe very few people and we put them away in prison for a long time, no one has a sin problem.

It's almost passe to say that, isn't it? Let me try to help us understand sin better for a minute because it is at the heart of seeing Jesus as the Lamb of God.

Sin is not just big crimes, okay? Kids, I especially want, if you struggle with this, I want you to listen. Sin is not just doing really big, bad things, okay?

Sin is any little thought or attitude or word or action, anything that goes against life with God the way he designed it.

Sin is separation from the close life with God that he created us for that deserves separation from God's loving embrace and the fullness of life forever.

[13:46] In short, sin misses God and gets death. I sometimes play this archery video game on the Wii with my kids.

in this game, you aim the bow and arrow, you pull it back and if you shoot and hit the bullseye right on, you get 10, okay?

If you aim and you just narrowly miss, you get maybe an 8, right? Pretty good, really close. The word for sin in the Bible refers to missing the mark.

anything less than perfect dead on bullseye because God is absolutely perfect and we can't live with him and miss the mark at all.

Every thought, every word, every deed, not merely better than most other people or pretty good most of the time, but bullseye every time.

[14:52] in that game we play, though, there are also some other objects for you to aim at. They're not anywhere near the bullseye. They're apples and other things and they're way off in the mountains but if you can aim at those and hit those, you get points for that too.

Sin's also like that. A lot of times we're not even aiming at God's mark, his design for us. We're shooting for what we want, aren't we? Isn't that what you experience most of the time?

For what feels right to us and if we're aiming over here, whether we hit that or not, we've missed God's bullseye. I've talked to a lot of people who say they don't really have a sin problem.

I've never talked to one person who lives up to his own standard for himself perfectly all the time. Y'all, I assure you, if you are not hitting your own standard, you are not perfect at hitting God's standard.

You and I, all of us, have a sin problem. It's not specific individual sins, it's not merely that, where if I just stop doing a few of these things like murder or stealing or lying or disobeying my parents, maybe I will always obey them.

[16:20] It's more than that. The sin of the world is the brokenness, the warped and twisted desires that we were born to live for ourselves rather than with God.

Even wanting to do what we want rather than, for example, what our parents tell us, even that is sin. We have aimed to be separated from God and for His rule and finding life in Him and we have earned separation from God.

Death forever. See, I know because I grew up in church that if you grow up in here, you tend to think you're pretty good.

Some of you maybe feel that way. You're pretty good because you've not spent yet much or maybe any time in jail. Because you perhaps have spent more time in this room than you have in the principal's office.

Raise your hand if that's you. Come on, all of y'all have been in here longer than you've been in the principal's office and that feels good, doesn't it? You feel like you must be better than most people out there. I mean, you would never do this or say that.

[17 : 40] don't forget, sin is any failure to be perfectly living with God all the time.

Let me never forget, says the old prayer, that the heinousness of sin, that means how awful, how bad sin is. It lies not in the nature of the sin committed, how bad a thing you did, as in the greatness of the person sinned against.

This great and awesome God who we're to live with and love and do exactly what he's called us to all the time, anything else is sin.

We're imperfect, friends. Pretty good in relationship to this God, even eight out of ten and it was really close, keeps you away from the source of life, keeps you facing death forever.

Just one thought that doesn't measure up, just one careless word, one lustful look separated from a perfect God.

[18 : 56] So John says, look, you need to see him, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Jesus is the one who dies because you were supposed to. Jesus is the one who dies so that you can live forever. You are stuck apart from God, needing access back to his holy presence because there's nothing like living with him.

And John says if you believe in Jesus, if you trust him to take your place, you will have life. You, even though you deserve to go way far away, you'll be welcomed in as a child of God into his family.

Friends, don't miss Jesus today. That's what he does for you. John also shines the spotlight on Jesus as the giver of the spirit.

John recounts here part of the baptism of Jesus that we read about elsewhere. God who gave John the job as spotlight operator had told John, hey, the one to shine the spotlight on, the star of the show will have the spirit come down and stay on him.

[20 : 17] That's what God had told John. And John watches this happen. A dove from heaven was accompanied we know by a voice heard by hundreds. They saw, they heard this.

And the spirit stays on Jesus because Jesus later gives the spirit. He baptizes with the spirit, the one you really need.

This was a mark of the Messiah in prophecy, full of the spirit. Maybe you know that Jesus got you back to God.

Forgiveness of all your failures is a big deal and you've got it. but you still feel weak and helpless today and many days.

What you long to experience is the power of God. Victory over the sin you're battling against today. Strength for living on God's mission in every relationship.

[21 : 18] Do I need something new? Someone else maybe? Maybe? Look no further than Jesus. He is the one who gives the spirit.

When you trust him and ask him, he sends his spirit so that you experience his power. Don't look anywhere else.

See Jesus for that. Finally, see Jesus as the son of God. Verse 34. I have seen and have borne witness that this is the son of God.

Certainly another affirmation of Jesus' deity, but in particular it's saying Jesus is the one who perfectly reveals God to us.

Remember that last week? He is the unique, specially selected one to show us the glory of God fully. there have been plenty of messianic figures around in John's day, but not many with a spotlight operator who himself earns respect and a following and seems like a man of God.

[22 : 31] Maybe this one's the Messiah and then says, look, look, there is the promised Messiah over there. Not here, over there. Don't miss him.

If you want to know what God is like, John is saying, listen to, watch and follow Jesus. This may be especially important for you this morning if you're confused about God right now.

Most of us have been through seasons of this at some point in our life. You've said things like, God, I thought you were faithful generation after generation, but I don't like the way you're relating to my kid or my grandkid right now.

Where's the faithfulness? Maybe you've gotten confused and said, God, I just don't feel like you really care about me right now because life is hard and I'm praying and it just feels like my prayers are hitting the ceiling and bouncing back and no one's listening.

Don't you know I'm hurting? God, I'm wondering if you're really loving because I like this Jesus guy and what I read about him it sounds right but then you seem harsh and hateful sometimes and I don't really know if that's you.

[23 : 53] John says, listen, look at Jesus, the son of God, his chosen representative in the flesh, the divine revealer so that you can know what the God who welcomes you in, who empowers you for life with him is really like.

If you have any doubts, he says, look at Jesus, he is faithful, he is present, he is loving. See it in Jesus. Scottish pastor Robert Murray McShane once wrote to a friend that for every one look at himself, his own sin, his own pain, he should take ten looks at Jesus.

I second that notion for all of us today in our sin, in our weakness, in our confusion. Listen to what he says, we'll see.

Jesus is altogether lovely, such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief, live much in the smiles of God, bask in his beams, feel his all-seeing eyes settled on you in love, and repose, rest in his almighty arms.

Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ.

[25 : 32] You can try that this afternoon. Fifteen years ago, in this same room with some of you right here with me, I was ordained to be a spotlight operator by vocation.

And Pastor Jay Sklar charged me that morning to declare two things, that I am not the Christ and that Jesus is the Christ.

Christ. We've spent the majority of our time this morning focusing on Jesus. Both of the Johns would agree that's the point here.

But as we look ten times and more and more at Jesus, there are also some things that we as spotlight operators should rejoice in.

As we see John shining the spotlight on Jesus, John is the lead spotlight operator, okay? He's unique. But we all are to be his witnesses, right?

[26 : 41] To point people to Jesus, to declare his excellencies, that's for all of us. As we all spotlight operators witness to him briefly three things, there is freedom to find our identity in relation to Jesus not out on our own.

John could have stolen the spotlight as the Christ or the prophet or Elijah, but he quite confidently says, listen, who I am is in relation to Jesus.

I'm a voice in the wilderness, Isaiah 40, preparing the way for a greater one to come. I'm a spotlight operator, John says.

listen, because Jesus has truly shown you God himself, what God has made you for, the fact that this God wants to relate with you, that you have a purpose, you don't have to invent an identity to matter.

You can actually embrace that you exist to watch Jesus closely, to love him deeply, and so to shine the spotlight on him.

[27 : 57] You are free from the pressure that you feel all around you every day to find yourself somewhere else, to make up that identity that will finally be significant.

No, you have that in relation to Jesus. Next, we're freed to live with humility that's neither false humility nor just weak.

This is not groveling low self-esteem from John when he says he's not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals. That's a job below even a Jewish slave.

John is bold here, isn't he, in front of powerful threats. He's confident. Why? Because he is so enamored with Jesus. He's not thinking less of himself when he says he's a spotlight operator.

He is so focused on the wonder of Jesus. He's so confident in the strength of the spirit that he gets from Jesus that he thinks of himself less.

[29 : 05] That's gospel humility. Being a spotlight operator for this star is a joy. He doesn't even think that it wouldn't be a wonderful and great thing.

He cannot wait. Can you read that when you read through the beginning of this passage? The answers get shorter and shorter, don't they? John cannot wait to stop answering silly questions about himself so that he can say, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. You know people like that, don't you? Who can't stand talking about themselves for very long without talking more about Jesus? You like being around them?

God, God, God, God, if you stare at the star long enough, you'll live with that kind of freedom too. It doesn't have to be about you anymore. Finally, we are freed to stop pretending and confess our sins honestly.

That Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world and that includes the sin of the spotlight operator, yours and mine.

[30 : 18] One of the best ways to shine your spotlight on the one who takes away sin is to be honest about your own sin that you need to be taken away. I am not telling you to go and sin more in order to be a better spotlight operator.

You've got plenty already. Not a problem. That's why you need the Lamb of God, okay? See, John doesn't have to pretend to be someone he's not.

Twice, in fact, he says something unnecessary to admit. I was here to shine the spotlight on someone and I didn't even know him. Don't think I'm the guy who's got it together.

You had one job but I didn't know what it was. The Lamb of God has given you access back to God. Forgiveness of all of your sins past, present, future. So as you encounter them, you can name them. It's such an unusual thing in our day, isn't it?

[31 : 20] To be able to be honest, to be able not to be defensive or self-protective, but you are freed from that.

You're freed up to be honest about your struggles and your failures and to shine the spotlight in those moments on Jesus. do we as Southwood together live as spotlight operators?

When someone compliments our great church buildings, do you say, you know the great thing is just having a place people can come and taste the grace of Jesus.

That reaches so many different kinds of people who are connected only by him. Or you know what's so great about the lodge is that it's a place young people can be valued not for their performance but for who they are finally.

They can be loved in their weakness because they hear there's a lamb of God who takes away all their sins. When a visitor says y'all have incredible music that's what they say, they don't talk about the preaching, they say y'all have incredible music.

[32 : 32] Do you say, you know, yes, they're so talented, all of them except DJ, he's okay. But what I love most is how they help me worship Jesus because he is so worthy of praise and I love that they're worshipping Jesus and so I can follow in that.

When a friend says, man, you're really a pretty great guy, you're really spiritual, all those spiritual disciplines you're learning, do you say spending time in silence and solitude or fasting or Sabbath, it's not about how great a Christian I am, that's really not the point, it's about how great my Jesus is and how much I need to be with him and to find life in him and I so quickly run and find it other places and so I'm calling my heart back to him.

See, look, if you're confused, you need to know I'm not the Christ. Jesus is the Christ. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, pointing people all the time to Jesus and may they forget the channel, seeing only him, pointing to Jesus in everything, including, and perhaps especially at this table, his table.

It was the night that Jesus was betrayed, that he took bread, he broke it, and he gave it to his disciples as I'm ministering in his name, give this bread to you.

He said, take, eat, this is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me. And then after supper, he took the cup and said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins, drink from it all of you.

[34 : 40] For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death in your place until he comes. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, his body

given to die so that you would live.

Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world because the blood of bulls and goats over and over was impossible for that blood to take away sins.

But when the Lamb of God shed his blood once and for all, sin was paid for. He paid it all. if that is your hope, come to this table, not ours, but the Lord's and meet with him and eat with him and be encouraged and strengthened in your faith.

If you see this and you don't behold here the Lamb of God who takes away your sins, if you don't yet trust Jesus, his life and his death for you, then don't come to eat and drink, but would you also come behold the Lamb of God?

Would you consider that he was spotless and that he was slain and that he says, trust me, believe in me and you will never die, that he would pay for your sins.

[36 : 19] You can trust him for that today and have the joy of knowing that he has taken all your guilt, all your shame on himself and removed it forever.

Let's pray and we'll celebrate together. Jesus, we thank you for stepping in where we deserve to stand, for paying the price we could never afford, for being the star so that we don't have to carry that burden.

we worship you, we give you thanks for even this bread and wine that remind us of how much you love us.

Would you use them this morning not for a common purpose but for a sacred purpose in our hearts that we would behold the Lamb of God and that we would be changed forever because of it.

We ask in your name. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.