

“The Lamb of God”
John 1:29-42
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On Thursday night I made it home from a church meeting in time to watch *ER* on television. I even got there in time to see the title of the show, which immediately caught my attention. The title was “Atonement.”

There is also a movie in the theaters right now with the same title. I’ve read the book and am hoping to see the movie soon. It’s interesting to see the now almost-common use of the rich theological word “atonement.”

In this *ER* episode two patients on stretchers are rushed into the hospital by EMTs. On one stretcher is an old man; on the other is a young boy. The boy had fallen into a freezing cold body of water. The old man had jumped in and rescued him. At the beginning of the show the child’s condition is such that the doctors wonder if he will live. Over and over again, the old man asks the nurses and doctors to give priority for medical care to the child and not to him. “Just save the boy,” he said.

We begin to hear the older man’s story as he is cared for in the ER. We learn that he was a prison physician. At the prison, he had been the physician who helped administer the lethal injections at nearly 20 executions.

We learn that as he drew near to the end of his career, the old doctor became increasingly disturbed by his role in these deaths. He came to view himself as a murderer. He was consumed with guilt, self-loathing and anguish.

One particular execution had especially triggered his guilt. After the execution of one of the inmates, it was later discovered that the inmate was innocent of the crime for which he had been executed.

The former prison doctor then spent his life in retirement finding the surviving family members of those he had executed. He sought them out to apologize to them and to atone for the sins he perceived he had committed. He atoned in different ways. In one case he put the child of one of the men executed through college; on another, he bought a car for the survivors.

The story takes an interesting turn when he reveals that he had been the physician in charge of the execution of the father of the boy who had nearly drowned. He had been at the lake talking to the boy's mother, hoping to find a way to atone. When the boy fell in the water, the man rescued him.

Despite all of the doctor's attempts to release himself from the hellish guilt he felt, despite all the apologies and acts of atonement, the old doctor remained in torment. He begged the chaplain and the doctors in the ER for an answer to his anguish. Nothing helped.

ER is not really a happy show. It often does not have happy endings. The mother of the boy—even when it was clear her son would live and recover—stood face-to-face with the prison doctor and said: “I do not forgive you. You think because you saved my son you'll make things right. But, I will never forgive you.”

In our text from the Gospel According to John, we hear John the Baptist upon seeing Jesus proclaim: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” What does this title mean?

This term recalls the sacrificial system used by the Israelites—a system through which they sought atonement. It was the system through which they sought “AT – ONE – MENT” with the God from whom they were separated by their sin. The Israelites would sacrifice animals in order to be made one with God again. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people and for himself.

The term may also refer to the Passover Lamb. When God delivered the Israelites out of bondage and slavery in Egypt, God used a sacrificed lamb as a means of deliverance for His people. The final plague sent upon the Egyptians was death of the first born in each household and among the livestock. God instructed the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb or goat and place its blood on the two doorposts and the lintel of their homes. The blood would be a sign for death to PASS OVER these households, sparing the first born from death. The Israelites were delivered out of Egypt after this terrible plague, and to this day they celebrate the Passover. Through the sacrifice of the lamb (or goat) the people were delivered from bondage into the Promised Land.

Some believe John the Baptist and/or John (the writer of the Gospel) had in mind the lamb referred to in the servant songs of Isaiah. In Isaiah 53:7-8) the writer says: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did

not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, he did not open his mouth.”

In each example the various lambs of God have secured forgiveness, deliverance and freedom. In short: atonement. It then makes sense that Jesus was called by the John “The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” In the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, the writer notes: “Atonement is not a single act of Calvary, but an eternal fact in the character of God himself. Christ on the cross is the incarnation of the eternal, suffering love of God for humanity” (p. 312).

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away your sin and mine, and with it our guilt. Jesus, our divine sacrifice, takes away sin. He brings forgiveness. He brings deliverance from the bondage of sin and death. He brings us freedom. He atones for us, making us one with God. He sets the wrong to right once and for all.

Most of us here today have heard this many times before. This doctrine is in our heads. We say words like redeemer and savior. We use the word atonement in reference to Christ and pretty much understand with our heads what this means.

But, when it comes to the heart, it is often a different situation. For many of us still carry around our sin and guilt with us. Some of us are still in bondage, despite the death and resurrection of Christ. Many of us spend our lives trying to atone for our past wrongs. We set out to do good works. We set out to make things right. We set out to find forgiveness from those we’ve wronged. None of this is wrong in and of itself. But these are not the ways to atonement. We can never do enough good works or apologize to everyone or make enough efforts to set things right. It’s impossible. Further, our efforts are dependent upon the response of others to forgive us and accept our efforts. And, our inner peace is affected by our own inability to forgive ourselves in many cases. Our efforts will never be enough to set us free.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We cannot take our own sin away. Jesus, the Lamb of God, has done all that needs to be done.

I wish the man in the ER could have embraced this good news in his head and heart. I hope **we** can.