

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
1:29-34

29. The next day John saw Jesus coming unto him, and said, Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30. This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man who is preferred before me, for he was before me. 31. And I knew him not; but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. 32. And John bore record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. 33. And I knew him not, but he that sent me to baptize with water said unto me, Upon whom you shall see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he who baptizes with the Holy Ghost. 34. And I saw, and bore record that this is the Son of God.

29.--[*The next day.*] This means the day after the conversation between John the Baptist and the deputation of priests and Levites. The careful marking of days by St. John at this stage of his gospel deserves particular notice.

[*Saw Jesus coming unto him.*] These words seem to prove that Jesus was not present on the preceding day, during the conversation with the priests and Levites, and that John's words, "Stands among you," cannot be literally taken.

It seems probable, as before observed, that our Lord came back to John after His temptation in the wilderness. The Spirit took Him into the wilderness "immediately" after His baptism (Mark i.12), and it was upon His return, at the end of forty days, that John the Baptist saw Him again.

[*And said, Behold!*] This appears to have been a public, open proclamation made by John to his disciples and the multitude who surrounded him. "Behold that person who is coming towards us. He is the Lamb of God, the Messiah of whom I have been preaching to you, and on whom I have told you to believe."

[*The Lamb of God.*] There can be no reasonable doubt that John gave this name to our Lord because He was the true sacrifice for sin, the true antitype of the passover lamb, and the lamb prophesied of by Isaiah. (Is. liii.7.) The idea that he only refers to the quietness and meekness of our Lord's personal character is utterly unsatisfactory. He is describing our Lord's official character as the great propitiation for sin.

The expression, "Lamb of God," according to some, signifies "that eminent, great, divine, and most excellent Lamb." It is a well-known Hebraism to describe anything very great as a thing "of God." Thus we read of "thunderings of God," and "trembling of God" (Ex. ix.28; 1 Sam. xiv.15.) According to others, it signifies the Lamb which God has provided from all eternity, and which God has long covenanted and promised to send into the

world to be slain for sinners. Both views make good doctrine, but the second seems the preferable one.

Bengel thinks that John called our Lord "the Lamb of God," with a special reference to the Passover, which was then near. (John ii.13.) He also sees a parallel between the expression "Lamb of God," and the phrase "sacrifice of God" (Psalm li.17), which means "the Sacrifice which God acknowledges as pleasing to Him."

Chemnitius thinks, in addition to other reasons why John calls our Lord "the Lamb," that he desired to show that Christ's kingdom was not political. He was neither the ram nor the he-goat described in Daniel. (Dan. viii.20.)

[*Takes away.*] The Greek word so rendered is given in the marginal reading, "beareth." Both ideas are included. It means "takes away by his expiatory death." The Lamb of God "bears" the sin of the world by taking it upon Himself. He allowed our guilt to be laid upon Him, and carried it away like the scapegoat, so that there was none left. It is one of the many expressions which describe the great Scripture truth that Christ's death was a vicarious sacrifice for sin. He became our substitute. He took upon Him our sin. He was made sin for us. Our sins were imputed to Him. He was made a curse for us.

The word here rendered "takes away" is found at least 100 times in the New Testament. In 82 places it is rendered, "take,"--"take up,"--or "take away." In five places it is "bear." In four it is "lift up." In two it is "remove." In most of the other places it is the imperative expression, "away with!" All point to the same view of the text before us: viz., "a complete atonement for sin."

The use of the present tense, "takes away," is remarked by all the best commentators, ancient and modern. It is intended to show the completeness of Christ's satisfaction for sin, and the continual application of His once-made sacrifice. He is always taking sin away. Rollock observes, "The influence of Christ's sacrifice is perpetual, and His blood never dries up."

The idea maintained by some that "taking away sin" in this place includes sanctification as well as justification, seems to me quite untenable. That Christ "takes away" the power of a believer's sins, when He applies His redemption to his soul, is no doubt true. But it is not the truth of this text.

[*The sin.*] Let it be noted that the singular number is used here. It is "the sin," not "the sins." The expression seems to me purposely intended to show that what Christ took away and born on the cross was not the sin of certain people only, but the whole accumulated mass of all the sins of all the children of Adam. He bore the weight of all, and made an atonement sufficient to make satisfaction for all.

The idea propounded by some, that "the sin" which Christ is said here to take away is only man's original sin, and that for man's actual sins each man must make satisfaction himself, is destitute of the slightest foundation in Scripture, contradicts scores of plain texts, and utterly overthrows the whole Gospel.

[*Of the world.*] It is almost needless to say that there are two views of this expression. Some say that it only means that Christ takes away the sin of Gentiles as well as Jews, and that it does not mean the sin of any but the elect. Others say that it really means that Christ "takes away" the sin of all mankind; that is, that He made an atonement sufficient for all, and that all are *salvable*, though not all saved, in consequence of His death.

I decidedly prefer the latter of these two views. I hold as strongly as anyone that Christ's death is profitable to none but to the elect who believe in His name. But I dare not limit and pare down such expressions as the one before us. I dare not say that no atonement has been made, in any sense, except for the elect. I believe it is possible to be more systematic than the Bible in our statements. When I read that the wicked who are lost "deny the Lord that bought them" (2 Peter ii.1), and that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor. v.19), I dare not confine the intention of redemption to the saints alone. Christ is for every man.

I am aware the objection is often made that "if Christ takes away the sin of the world, and yet the vast majority of men die in their sins and are lost, Christ's work for many was wrought in vain." I see no force in this objection. I think we might as well argue that because sin came into the world and marred creation, creation was in vain. We are not talking of the works of men but of the eternal Word, and we must be content to see much in His works that we do not entirely understand. Though multitudes are lost, I have no doubt the last day will prove that nothing that Christ did for them was in vain.

I rest in the view of the text that in some ineffable and inscrutable way the whole world's sin was borne and atoned for by Christ. "He takes away, or makes atonement for, the sin of all the men and women in the world." I have no doubt, from Scripture, that the vast majority of "the world's" inhabitants will be found at last to have received no benefit from Christ and to have died in their sins. I repudiate the idea of universal salvation as a dangerous heresy and utterly contrary to Scripture. But the lost will not prove to be lost because Christ did nothing for them. He bore their sins, he carried their transgressions, he provided payment, but they would not put in their claim to any interest in it. He set the prison door open to all, but the majority would not come out and be free. In the work of the Father in election, and of the Spirit in conversion, I see limitation in the Bible most clearly. But in the work of Christ in atonement, I see no limitation. The atonement was made for all the world, though it is applied to and enjoyed by none but believers. Christ's intercession is the peculiar privilege of His people. But Christ's

atonement is a benefit which is offered freely and honestly to all mankind.

In saying all this I am fully aware that the word "world" is sometimes used in a qualified sense, and must be interpreted with some limitation. When it is said, "The world knew Him not" (John i.10), it cannot mean that not a single person in the world knew Him. But in the text before us I see no necessity for limitation. I see the whole mass of mankind's guilt brought together in one singular word, "the sin of the world," and that sin, I am told, Christ "takes away." And I believe the true meaning to be that the Lamb of God has made atonement sufficient for all mankind, though efficient unquestionably to none but believers.

Augustine remarks, "How weighty must be the blood of the Lamb, by whom the world was made, to turn the scale when weighed against the world!"

Calvin, in his commentary on this verse, says: "John uses the word sin in the singular number for any kind of iniquity; as if he had said that every kind of unrighteousness which alienates men from God is taken away by Christ. And when he says 'The sin of the world,' he extends this favour indiscriminately to the whole human race, that the Jews might not think that He had been sent to them alone. Hence we infer that the whole world is involved in the same condemnation; and that as all men, without exception, are guilty of unrighteousness before God, they need to be reconciled to Him. John the Baptist, by speaking generally of the sin of the world, intended to impress upon us the conviction of our own misery, and to exhort us to seek the remedy. Now our duty is to embrace the benefit which is offered to all, that each of us may be convinced that *there is nothing to hinder him* from obtaining reconciliation in Christ, provided that he comes to Him by the guidance of faith."

Brentius says: "Although all the men in the world do not receive the benefit of Christ's passion, because all do not believe on Christ, yet that benefit is so offered to the whole world, that whosoever, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, king or peasant, high or low, rich or poor, sick or well, old or young, receives Christ by faith, is justified before God, and saved with an eternal salvation."

Musculus says: "John places before us no one particular person whose sins the Lamb has come to take away; but under the expression 'the world,' he comprehends the whole race of mortals from the very beginning of the world to the end of it."

Melancthon says: "He taketh away the sin, that is the universal condemnation, of the human race."

Chemnitius says: "John affirms that the benefits of Christ belong not to the Jews only, but to the whole world, and that no one who is in the world is excluded from them, if he is only willing to receive them by faith."

The deep spiritual knowledge exhibited by John the Baptist in this verse ought not to be overlooked. Such a sentence as the one before us never

fell from the lips of any other disciple of Christ before the day of Pentecost. Others could say that our Lord was the Christ, the son of God, the Messiah, the Son of David, the King of Israel, the Son of the Blessed, who was to come into the world. But none seem to have seen so clearly as John that Christ was the sacrifice for sin, the Lamb that was to be slain. Well would it be for the Church of Christ in the nineteenth century, if all its ministers possessed as much knowledge of Christ's atonement as is here shown by John the Baptist! John saw the vicarious sacrifice of Christ before He died on the cross. Many so-called Christians cannot see Christ's vicarious sacrifice even at this day!

30.--[*This is He of whom I said.*] These words appear to have been spoken in our Lord's presence, and to have been specially intended to point the multitude to Him. "This person before you is He of whom I have repeatedly spoken in my ministry, as the coming One who is far greater than myself. You see Him now before you."

[*A man...He was before me.*] The human and divine natures of our Lord are here brought together by John in one sentence. "He of whom I spoke to you is a man, and yet at the same time He is One who was before me, because He has existed from all eternity."

31.--[*I knew Him not.*] This means, "I was not acquainted with Him in time past. There has been no private collusion or arrangement between Him and me. I did not even know Him by sight until the day when He came to be baptized." The difficulty connected with these words of John will be considered fully at the 33rd verse.

[*That He should be made manifest to Israel, etc.*] John here declares that the great end of his ministry was that this wonderful Person, whom he had just pointed out, should be manifested and made known to the Jews. He did not come to form a party of his own, or to baptize in his own name. The whole object of his preaching and baptizing was now before his hearers. It was simply to make known to Israel the Mighty One, the Lamb of God, whom they now saw.

32.--[*And John bore record.*] These words seem to denote a public and solemn testimony borne by John to the fact that our Lord had been visibly acknowledged by God the Father as the Messiah. If his hearers would have further proof that this Person, to whom he was pointing them, was really the Christ, he would tell them what he had seen with his own eyes. He would bear witness that he had seen visible proofs that this Person was really the Messiah.

[*I saw.*] This means, "At the time when our Lord was baptized, I saw this heavenly vision." Whether any beside John saw this vision and heard the voice of the Father which accompanied it, may well be doubted. At any rate, if they did, they did not understand either what they saw or heard."

[*The Spirit descending, etc.*] This means that John saw something coming down from heaven after the manner of a dove flying downwards, and that what

he saw was the Holy Spirit, graciously revealing Himself in a visible manner.

[*It abode upon Him.*] This means that the heavenly vision of the Holy Spirit rested upon Christ at the time of His baptism. It lighted down upon Him as a dove would settle down, and did not leave Him.

I cannot satisfy myself that the expression "like a dove," in this verse means that any dove was really seen by John when our Lord was baptized. All the four Gospel writers describe an appearance "like a dove." St. Luke distinctly speaks of "a bodily shape." That something visible was seen by John is plain, and that its appearance descending on our Lord resembled the downward flight of a dove, is also plain. But I am unable to see that the Holy Ghost took upon Him the actual form of a dove.

Some think, as Augustine, that the likeness to a dove was especially employed at this time to answer the figure of Noah's flood. He says, "As a dove did at that time bring tidings of the abating of the water, so doth it now of the abating of the wrath of God upon the preaching of the Gospel."

We must beware of supposing for a moment that this vision of the Spirit descending was meant to imply that our Lord first received the grace of the Holy Ghost at that particular time, or that He had not received it before in the same degree. We must not doubt that the Holy Ghost dwelt in Jesus "without measure" from the very time of His incarnation. The vision was meant to show the Church that when Christ's ministry began, a fuller revelation of all Three Persons in the Trinity was made at once to mankind. It was meant at the same time to be a formal testimony to John the Baptist that the Messiah was before him, that this was the promised Saviour whom God had anointed with the Holy Ghost and sent into the world, that the time of Christ's ministry had begun, that He who had the spirit to bestow on men was before him, and that His entrance on His public work was attested by the presence both of the Father and the Holy Ghost, in short, by a manifestation of all Three Persons in the Trinity at one time.

As a Levite, John doubtless was familiar with all the ceremonies by which the Jewish high priests and kings were solemnly inducted into their office. For his satisfaction, therefore, our Lord received visible attestation from heaven, and was publicly recognized as the Messiah, the anointed Priest, and King, and Prophet, before His forerunner's eyes.

Musculus on this verse remarks: "The Spirit did not descend on Christ's account, who was never separate, either from the Holy Spirit or from the Father--but on our account, that He who came to redeem the world might be made manifest through John's declaration of Him."

33.--[*I knew Him not.*] The Greek word so rendered, both here and in the 31st verse, is literally, "I had not known Him." There is a difficulty connected with the expression, which demands explanation. St. Matthew tells us that when our Lord came to John to be baptized, John said to Him, "I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?" (Matt.

iii.14), showing plainly by these words that he knew He was before him. And yet here we find John saying, "I knew Him not." How can this apparent inconsistency be reconciled?

Some think, as Chrysostom, that "John is speaking of former times, and not of the times near to his baptism."

Some think, as Augustine, that it means, "I had not known till that day that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Ghost, although I had long known Him personally, and had recognized Him as the Christ of God. But when He came to be baptized, it was also revealed to me that He would confer on men the great gift of the Holy Ghost."

Some think, as Brentius and Beza, that it means, "I had not known Jesus by sight until the day when He came to be baptized. I knew that He had been born of the Virgin Mary, but was not personally acquainted with Him, having been myself brought up in the desert." (Luke i.80.) I had only been told by Him who sent me to baptize, that whenever the Messiah came to be baptized, I should recognize Him by the descent of the Holy Ghost. When He did come, I received a secret revelation from God that Messiah stood before me, and under the power of that feeling I confessed my unworthiness to baptize Him. But when at last I did baptize Him, I received a full confirmation of my faith, by beholding the promised sign of the descent of the Holy Ghost." Those who hold this view think the case of Samuel receiving a secret revelation about Saul an illustration of the matter. (1Sam. ix.15.)

Some think as Poole, that it means, "I knew Him not perfectly and distinctly, though I had an impression when I first saw Him coming to be baptized, that He was one far greater than myself, and under that impression demurred to baptizing Him. After His baptism I saw clearly who He was."

The last explanation is perhaps the simplest, and most probable. That John at one time did not know our Lord by sight at all, that he afterwards knew Him imperfectly, and that his perfect knowledge of Him, His nature, office, and work was not attained till the time when the Spirit descended at His baptism, are points that seem clear. The time when he said, "I have need to be baptized of Thee," would seem to be the time of imperfect knowledge, when the fact that Jesus was the Messiah began to dawn upon him, and made him cry out, "Comest Thou to me?"

Chrysostom observes that the expression is a proof "that the miracles which they say belong to Christ's childhood are false, and the invention of those who bring them to notice. For if He had begun from His early age to work miracles, neither could John have been ignorant of Him, nor would the multitude have needed a teacher to make Him known."

[*He that sent me...same said.*] This expression indicates that John the Baptist had many special revelations of God concerning His work, of which we have no record given to us. He seems to have been taught and instructed

like one of the old prophets.

[*He who baptizes with the Holy Ghost.*] The remarkable description of our Lord, here given by John the Baptist, has received three very different interpretations.

Some think that it means, "This is He who shall institute Christian baptism, with which the gift of the Holy Ghost shall be connected. His baptism shall be like mine, a baptism of water. But it shall not be a baptism of water only, as mine is, but a baptism accompanied by the regenerating grace of the Spirit.

Some think that it means, "This is He who shall baptize with the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost, and confer miraculous gifts on the Church."

Some think it means, "This is He who shall baptize the hearts of men, which neither thou canst do nor any other human minister. He has the prerogative of giving spiritual life. He is the giver of the Holy Spirit to all who believe on Him."

I am decidedly of the opinion that this third view is the correct one. It is the only one which seems at all answerable to the majesty of the Person spoken of, the dignity of the speaker, and the solemnity of the occasion. To say, "This is He who shall institute Christian baptism" seems a very lame and impotent account of the expression. To say, "This is He who shall bestow miraculous gifts at the day of Pentecost," is a degree better, but gives a picture of our Lord's office confined to a single generation. But to say, "This is He who, in every age of the Church, will baptize the hearts of His people by the Holy Ghost, and by this baptism continually replenish the ranks of His mystical body," is saying that which exactly suits the occasion, and describes our Lord's work in the world in a worthy manner.

Musculus, on this verse, remarks: "What is it to baptize with the Holy Ghost? It is to regenerate the hearts of the elect, and consecrate them into the fellowship of the sons of God." Again, he says, "It is Christ alone who baptizes with the Holy Ghost; a power which, as divine, He keeps in His own hands and never communicates to any minister."

The view I have maintained is ably set forth in Bucer's commentary on this place. He says, "By the baptism of water we are received into the outward Church of God; by the baptism of the Spirit into the inward Church." The opinion of one who was Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, in the reign of Edward the Sixth, and the personal friend and adviser of Cranmer and the other English reformers, deserves much consideration. It proves, at any rate, that the doctrine of inward baptism of the Spirit, which Christ alone gives to every believer, and the identity of this baptism with conversion or new birth, are not such modern and contemptible notions as some persons are pleased to think.

The untenableness of the view, held by many, that John's baptism was not

the same as Christian baptism, to all intents and purposes, is ably shown by Lightfoot in his "Harmony of the Four Evangelists." If it was not Christian baptism, it would be hard to prove that some of the disciples ever received Christian baptism at all. There is not the slightest evidence that Andrew, Peter, and Philip were baptized by Jesus.

The familiarity which John displays with the Holy Ghost and His work deserves particular attention. To say, as many do, that the Holy Ghost was not known until the day of Pentecost, is saying what cannot be proved. The Holy Ghost has always been in the hearts of believers in every age of the world. His abundant outpouring is undoubtedly a leading mark of the days since Christ came into the world. But the Holy Ghost was ever in God's elect, and without Him there never was a soul saved.

34.--[*I saw and bore record, etc.*] This means, I saw perfectly, and from that time have distinctly and unhesitatingly testified that the person whom you now see before you is the Christ, the Son of the living God. From the day of His baptism I have been fully convinced that this is the Messiah."

John here declares his own firm conviction of our Lord's divinity and eternal generation. He was satisfied that our Lord was not the Son of Mary only, but the Son of God.