

## Death Of A Lamb

by Staff

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Have you ever seen a lamb slaughtered? For those of you who have, I am sure that, unless you had been previously calloused by working on a farm or in a slaughterhouse, that shocking experience has stayed vividly in your mind. It is not something that is easily forgotten.

During the Passover season, in addition to the New Testament symbols of unleavened bread and wine, the members of God's church continue to ponder the Old Testament symbolism of the slaughter of lambs. What those lambs represent is still very much apropos to modern-day Christians. This article will examine the sacrifice of the Passover lamb in detail, illustrating the deep and eternal significance in what many feel is a barbaric and inhumane practice. Though we do not sacrifice lambs today, the ancient ritual contains a number of thoroughly modern spiritual principles.

### Sheep Slaughter

Some years ago, Rick, a coworker of mine who was also a sheep farmer, sold me two ewes, adult, female sheep. He sold them to me at a tremendously low price, their value having been reduced because of their inability to bear lambs. Rick, with his many years of experience in raising sheep, told me that if we enjoyed eating lamb, we would probably also enjoy the milder-tasting mutton we would obtain from this pair.

However, we soon put all thoughts of the taste of their meat out of our minds. My wife gave the sheep the humorous names of *Cassa* and *Roll*, and our family really enjoyed having them around. It was so calming for us to watch these good-natured animals feeding, relaxing, chewing the cud, and wandering tranquilly around our property.

The months sped by, and soon the sad day came: the optimum time to have the ewes slaughtered and butchered. The Feast of Tabernacles was approaching, all the brethren would be away or otherwise busy, and my father-in-law was away on a long vacation. No one would be around to feed the sheep their hay and water.

Another friend, Wayne, a man who had raised many cattle and was, like Rick, skilled at this kind of activity, volunteered to do "the dirty deed" and the butchering if I would help him with the necessary heavy lifting. One Sunday afternoon, then, Wayne arrived at our home with his rifle, and I sent my wife and our four daughters out shopping for the remainder of the day.

Because our family had become so used to having the two peaceful animals around the place, the slaughter of Cassa and Roll was very, very unpleasant to watch. Wayne, in his long experience, was understandably thick-skinned about the whole procedure. Without any "goodbye," he simply loaded his rifle, picked out one of the ewes, and shot her in the head at very close range. Her legs immediately became rubbery, her eyes glazed over, she tottered for a few seconds, then fell and tumbled down a small hill. A look of horror and fear immediately appeared in the eyes of the other ewe as she saw her old companion fall. If I had looked in a mirror at that moment, I would have probably seen a similar look on my own face.

Wayne told me that, although her brain was now dead, the sheep's heart and lungs would continue to operate for a few more minutes. To bleed her, he must cut her throat immediately, and we would then need to hang her by her hind legs. As I was attaching a rope around her hind legs, I heard some strange, wheezing and gurgling sounds from the front end of the animal. After I had finished my little job, I returned to Wayne who was just completing the cutting of the animal's throat. Remember, this was an adult sheep, not a tender, one-year-old lamb. My eyes fell on the awful spectacle of the severed windpipe still puffing in time with the irregular, strained and waning inflation and deflation of the lungs. We hung the sheep's carcass from the edge of the roof of the woodshed and then went to repeat the gruesome procedure with the other poor victim.

Every year when Passover season comes around, I think of the grisly demise of Cassa and Roll—even though they were comparatively tough, adult, mutton-producing ewes and not tender, young lambs like those that picture the sacrifice of our Savior.

### **Prime Time**

When is the meat of a sheep (or goat) at its very best, and in its prime for butchering? I asked Rick this question recently, and he told me that, although it can vary slightly from breed to breed between eight and twelve months, the prime age for butchering never exceeds a year. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* article entitled "Lamb" agrees:

Lamb: Live sheep before the age of one year, and the flesh of such animals. Mutton refers to the flesh of the mature ram or ewe at least one year old; the meat of sheep between 12 and 20 months old may be called yearling mutton.

We can be sure then that lamb meat will be at its best when the lamb is less than a year old because a lamb is *not* a lamb if it is over a year old. At a year, it becomes an adult sheep—a ram or a ewe—and its meat becomes mutton. This is interesting because, for the annual Passover sacrifice, God commands, "Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats" (Exodus 12:5).

God commands the Israelites to choose an unblemished, male lamb of the first year. The lamb was to be of the highest quality and no older than one year. This is the time that it would be at its very best meat quality and highest saleable value.

Although I have never seen the slaughter of a lamb in its first year of life, I would expect that it is probably more unpleasant to watch than the slaughter of an older sheep. I have no wish to be morbid by suggesting this, nor am I criticizing God's perfect timing, but the members of the New Testament church miss a great deal by not experiencing this annual, physical ritual of the Passover sacrifice. It would provide so much more rich meaning to us than it did to God's Old Testament people. Though most church members would consider it a very unpleasant sight, it would be a very significant annual "jolt" that would remind us of the horrible suffering Jesus Christ endured for us.

On the other hand, it may be that God's Old Testament people took the annual Passover sacrifice for granted because they witnessed so many offerings in the course of a year. Perhaps they did not understand the spiritual symbolism of those offerings as well. They may not have understood the meaning of the offerings because they took them for granted.

Many—myself included—have asked why Jesus Christ will reinstitute animal sacrifices after His return (see Ezekiel 40:41-42; 44:11; 46:24; Zechariah 14:21). One reason may be to help the resurrected members of the Old Testament congregation of Israel to learn to pay better attention to the deeper spiritual meanings of the physical sacrifices. A second reason might be to introduce the resurrected and glorified members of the New Testament church to the rich symbolism and significance of the sacrifices.

## A Human Death

For most people in our "civilized" Western society, the slaughter of a young lamb would be shocking, unpleasant to watch and maybe even offensive. To witness the slaughter or execution of a human being would, of course, be even more disturbing.

Other than those who have served in the military, and except for the occasional news videos or photographs of executions or assassinations, most of us have not seen real, violent human death firsthand. To some, the simulated violence and death in a television program or movie is so troubling that they want it banned or extensively curtailed. It is certainly unpleasant to watch anyone die, even a relatively peaceful death.

Have you ever seen a person die, perhaps a close relative? I have not. Although I was with some of my loved ones during their last hours of life, for some reason, God did not allow me to be present at the actual moment when my baby son died, when my mother died, or when my wife's mother and father died.

Somehow, human death does not seem *quite* as unacceptable when the person is very old and has enjoyed a good, long life, or when his death is peaceful and nonviolent. On the negative side, we normally do not question a person's death when he has flagrantly and selfishly abused his health or is guilty of a violent crime. Human death seems so much worse when the person is young—a child, a youth, or a young man or woman in his or her prime of life; when the person is either relatively or absolutely innocent; or when the death is painful, traumatic, or violent.

The Lamb of God, whose life was of an infinitely higher value than the sum of all human life, was just thirty-three years old when He sacrificed Himself for our salvation. He was in the very prime of His physical life and, like no other adult human before or since, He was one hundred percent innocent of sin. Yet He suffered the most painful, traumatic, violent and shameful death that the human mind could invent.

## Love and Death

As we consider the supreme and selfless love for humankind of Jesus Christ and God the Father (John 15:13), let us consider three questions:

- » Is death really an enemy?
- » Should we look forward to death?
- » Did Jesus look forward to death?

In the arts, love and death are frequently linked. A few familiar examples that come to mind are Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and

the beautiful "Liebstod" ("Love-death") sequence in Wagner's opera, *Tristan und Isolde*. In former times, it was considered fashionable and suave for the rich and famous to appear melancholy and mournful in the presence of their friends, to favor poetry, literature and music dealing with death, and even to feign a yearning for death.

Some late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novelists, poets and composers took this doleful subject matter another step farther. Their works describe the praise of death and, in some circles, even to the extent of the love of death, the yearning for death. A scene from *War and Peace* tells of Pierre Bezukhov, who, upon joining the Russian Freemasons, discovers that the highest virtue a member of that secret society could strive for is "the love of death"!

With various objectives for the teaching, motivation, and encouragement of His children, God also inspired the concepts of love and death to be linked in Scripture. For example: "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death; jealousy as cruel as the grave; its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame" (Song of Songs 8:6).

Uncontrolled or immature love, lust, passion and jealousy can be forces as strong as death and can lead to death. How many "crimes of passion" are committed around the world each year? How many teenagers in recent years have committed suicide or murder because a girlfriend or boyfriend rejected them for another, or because their parents disapproved of their relationship?

I John 3:14 is a second example of love linked with death: "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death." Contrary to man's Satan-inspired ideas, love should be linked to life, not death. We should consider life, under normal circumstances, as a good thing and death a comparatively bad thing. Love of our physical and spiritual brothers and sisters is consistent with life, and the lack of love for them is consistent with death.

Solomon gives us a third example: "But he who sins against me [wisdom] wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death" (Proverbs 8:36). In this section, wisdom stands for God and His way of life. This proverb tells us that those who hate God and sin against Him—likely without realizing it—are lovers of death. If the hatred of God is proportional to the love of death, then the love of God must likewise be proportional to the love of life.

## The Lamb of God

Did not Solomon also write, "[T]he day of death [is better] than the day of one's birth," and "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting" (Ecclesiastes 7:1-2)? Was Solomon just having a bad day when he wrote this? Or can there really be positive aspects to death? We will return to this question later, but for now, let us ask another:

Did Jesus "love death"? Did He look forward to it? Did He look upon death generally—and His own death specifically—as positive events? Some scriptures almost give the impression that He did. Notice Matthew 16:21-23:

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You." But He turned and said to

Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

Poor Peter was looking through a glass very darkly and suffering from the common human malady of selective hearing and understanding. All he seemed to hear and understand were those horrifying words about the suffering, the rejection, and the killing. Did he not hear Jesus telling them that His resurrection from the dead—one of the greatest turning points in all eternity—was soon to occur?

Peter had the powerful Satan whispering words of fear into his mind: fear for Jesus, fear of persecution, fear of his own death. Would any of us have fared any better than Peter? Satan, up to his old tricks, knew that one of history's most pivotal days was approaching and what the glorious outcome of Jesus' suffering and death would be. He wanted to make a concerted, eleventh-hour effort to prevent it from happening. How? By using human fear and reason—by frightening and tempting Peter into trying to talk his beloved friend Jesus out of even mentioning these two events: the greatest sacrifice and the greatest miracle in human history.

Jesus was no coward, of course, but He certainly did not look forward to the impending physical torture that He knew He must endure. He had the ability—if just through Scripture alone—to foresee it all in detail. Paul suggests that, even before His incarnation, Christ frequently pondered what He would have to experience: "He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once in the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 9:26).

In Gethsemane, just outside the eastern gates of Jerusalem, on our Savior's last night on earth as a human being, He, in deep and fervent prayer, asked His Father:

"O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." . . . He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." . . . So He left [Peter, James and John], went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44)

Perhaps it was not just the approaching physical torture that Jesus dreaded as He made this plea to His Father. For every microsecond of eternity (with the possible two exceptions of His time in Mary's womb and His human babyhood), He had enjoyed a level of consciousness, involvement, control and communication with God the Father that no other human could even begin to comprehend. It must have been almost intolerable for the Son of God, the great YHWH of the Old Testament, to contemplate being totally unconscious and "out of the picture," even for a mere 72 hours.

Jesus' agony no doubt included the foreknowledge of the spiritual torture of billions of sins committed throughout human history being laid on His innocent head. Jesus knew that His mind would soon become besmirched, infected and injected with every filthy sin that man had ever committed in the past and would commit from that time on.

God tells us in I Corinthians 15:56, "The sting of death is sin." Most of us have been stung by a spider, bee, wasp, or hornet. The pain of an insect sting increases rapidly as its poison spreads through the blood vessels, deep into the body part that has been stung, and it can sometimes be

almost unbearable. Nevertheless, it is impossible for us to imagine a fraction of the spiritual agony that those billions of "stings of death" caused our Savior as all the sins of the world were laid upon Him.

With all His might, He strove to dwell on better things (Philippians 4:8). He struggled to look beyond those hours of torture, despite His foreknowledge of their severity. Jesus knew what would happen after this day of agony and shame that was just beginning. More than any other human being who ever lived, He understood what lay beyond the split second of death and His short stay in the tomb. Just hours before this prayer in Gethsemane, He had spoken joyfully to His Father about their approaching reunion and regaining His former glory (John 17:5, 11, 13).

How did King Nebuchadnezzar feel when God gave him back his status as a real human being and a great king after living the existence of the lowest, slinking animal in the wild (Daniel 4:29-36)? How much more did Jesus look forward to waking after three days in the tomb as the Eternal God!

Did Jesus look forward to His death? No. He looked beyond His hours of suffering and beyond the instant of His death. He looked forward to life!

### **Good and Bad?**

However, if we believe Ecclesiastes 7:1-4, we must accept that death must have its "better" points. We are all well aware of the reasons why we think of death as a negative thing, but how can we think of such an event and condition as positive?

We must always remember that our Creator, the Master Craftsman who made everything of the highest quality (Genesis 1:4-31), built death into man's design. He did this for good reasons. Surprisingly, there really are good and positive purposes behind both the "first death" and the "second death" (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). The first death is the one with which every person is familiar—the one everyone must face. This death terminates the physical life of every human being who lives during the 6,000 years allotted to man.

Before the Flood, even though many people lived for multiple hundreds of years, they all still died. Afterward, God gradually shortened man's average lifespan to 70 years (Psalm 90:10). Perhaps He did this to show us the results of long lives of disobedience to God's law, such as we see in the record of the pre-Flood world, the Tower of Babel, and Sodom and Gomorrah. What would the world be like if it were filled with immortal, law-breaking humans?

As Herbert W. Armstrong taught, God is reproducing Himself. He wants children who will not turn to lives of sin, as Satan and his demons did, and continue to live forever in misery. Unlike the destiny of that miserable band of fallen angels, death is the wages of sin for human beings; death is our penalty for failing to live God's way (Romans 6:23).

Is death, the just penalty for sin created by God, really the "bad thing" in this equation? Is it not rather sin, which causes the death penalty to be incurred, that is really bad?

God does not want one of us to live a miserable, sinful existence for all eternity. He wants children who will learn to obey Him willingly, who will learn to reject sin and reap the positive results throughout eternal lives of joy. He has promised to give every human an opportunity to receive His gifts of salvation and eternal life in His Family and Kingdom. However, if any of His regenerated

children insist on continuing in sin after they have been given adequate time to learn, weigh and understand the consequences of each alternative, they will incur the penalty of thesecond death, God's loving and merciful penalty of eternal sleep (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). Herbert Armstrong often paraphrased the apostle Paul, saying: "The wages of sin is death! Eternal death! Not eternal life in hell-fire, agony and misery!" We can see by this merciful method of final punishment that, when God tells us to love our enemies, He is not asking us to do something that He is not willing to do Himself. What a loving and merciful God we have!

We believe and hope that Jesus Christ will return very soon to straighten out the mess that man has made of His creation. However, if He does not return before our allotted time expires, we will experience the dreamless sleep of the first death as He did. Jesus' sleep lasted only 72 hours. We should not be concerned that ours will probably last longer because, when we are in a deep, sound sleep, we are unaware of time passing (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

### **Friend or Foe?**

Now for our deferred question: Is death really an enemy? It is Paul's teaching that, yes, death *is* an enemy: "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death" (I Corinthians 15:26).

If death is part of God's good creation, how can it also be an enemy? God does not create enemies, does He? Yes, He does! For the ultimate good of His people, God has allowed—and even raised up—many different kinds of enemies throughout history to test us. Without making light of the seriousness of human death, we might look on it as a "disposable test tool." When God has finished with it, He will throw it in the garbage!

Yes, death is an enemy. Death and its inseparable and causative partner, sin, are enemies that, although they have led to so much unhappiness and misery over the years, God will one day destroy. But they will not go down without a fight!

In some respects, the first and most crucial battle in the war between humankind and these enemies, sin and death, has been won already by our Savior: ". . . knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him" (Romans 6:9).

Because Christ won this first battle through His death and resurrection, we—His fellow-soldiers (II Timothy 2:3-4; Ephesians 6:11-18)—have been given an opportunity to fight in these subsequent battles, to participate in the destruction of sin and death. Our reward is to receive the gift of eternal life: "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. . . . For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive" (I Corinthians 15:20, 22).

Is it any wonder that Satan did not want Jesus to talk to His disciples about His future suffering, death, and resurrection? Satan was—and, for a little while longer, still is—the prince of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). He had been permitted to enjoy things his own way for so long that he had no desire whatsoever for battle to commence.

Although Jesus' death and resurrection constituted the first and most crucial battle and victory in this war against sin and death, it was not the last. Encouraged, empowered, and strengthened by the Author of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10), His fellow soldiers are involved in an ongoing daily battle with Satan and his forces.

In addition, there are more major battles to come. God will win an intermediate battle at the time of the first resurrection (I Corinthians 15:54). Even then the war over sin and death will still not be totally won. Satan will stir up the massed armies of the world to join in an unholy alliance with those of the Beast and the False Prophet. Together they will mount an insane attack upon Jesus Christ, His spirit brothers and sisters, and His vast army of angels as they descend to the earth (Revelation 19:14, 19).

The opening verses of Revelation 20 describe the first imprisonment of Satan. Even with Jesus Christ reigning on the earth and without Satan's direct influence, it will still take many years to get the spirit of sin, competition, strife, conflict and death out of man's system. The victory, however, will still not be complete. After the Millennium Christ must engage in a final battle, and Satan will then be permanently imprisoned (Revelation 20:7-10). However, God's plan takes things further:

And I saw a great white throne, and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. And Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

Death will, at last, be swallowed up in victory. Sin, death, Hades (the very idea of the grave), and Satan, with the billions of sins of the world firmly transferred onto his head, will be thrown into the Lake of Fire, never again to reappear. It is beyond our human mental powers to be able to imagine the joy and glory of that day.

How complete will be the joy of humankind, now the Family of God, when this day arrives at last? "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

No more death! No more sorrow, crying or pain! What a day that will be! The purpose of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God will at last be fulfilled. Our Savior will proclaim that the terrible agony He willingly endured for His brothers and sisters was worth it. With His children gathered around Him, our Father will joyfully proclaim that even the risk of losing His Son was worth it.

What a day! Let us, then, keep the Passover—with its death of the Lamb of God—with this in mind, looking forward to that wonderful time!