

Lesson Three: One Sacrifice for All Time

I. Worthy Is the Lamb

A. The Titles of Jesus

Jesus is given many titles in Scripture.

He is called "the Anointed" (see [Acts 4:26](#)) and "the Christ" (see [Acts 3:20](#)). Frequently he is referred to as "Lord," "Master," "Teacher."

He is called "Lion of Judah" ([Revelation 5:5](#)), "High Priest" (see [Hebrews 3:1](#)), "Son of God" (see [Mark 1:11](#)), and "King of the Jews" (see [Mark 15:2](#); [15:26](#)).

Such titles acknowledge Jesus as God, King, and head of the Church in heaven and on earth.

But in the Bible's final book, he is called - no less than 28 times - the Lamb: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength, honor and glory and blessing" ([Revelation 5:12](#)).

It is a very curious description. In a way, it is the opposite of the other titles used to describe Jesus. While the other titles connote power and majesty, His description as a "Lamb" calls to mind weakness, powerlessness.

But it reflects a basic belief found in the New Testament - a belief that we continue to profess in each Mass.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, the priest prays: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to His supper."

These words combine two verses from Scripture: John the Baptist's description of Jesus (see [John 1:29,36](#)), and the angel's words about the heavenly feast in the Bible's last book (see [Revelation 19:9](#)).

B. The Lamb of God

Why do we call Him a Lamb?

Because of all the many sacrifices the Israelites offered, one in particular stood out as the most important sacrifice on the calendar: the Passover, which celebrated Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt (see Exodus 12).

Central to the celebration of the Passover was the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb, and the eating of its roasted flesh.

As we will see in this lesson, in calling Jesus the Lamb, the New Testament wants to call to mind this Old Testament sacrifice.

The image of Jesus as the Lamb expresses the Christian belief that in His death on the cross, Jesus was offered in sacrifice - as the lamb was sacrificed by the Israelite families before the Exodus.

In professing that Jesus is the lamb of God in our celebration of the Eucharist, we are recalling His sacrificial death on the cross. But more than that, we are, as we will see, "re-presenting" that sacrifice.

II. Jesus, the Final and Perfect Sacrifice

A. Jesus and Isaac

The New Testament sees Jesus as the Lamb of a new Passover.

But more than that, the New Testament presents His sacrifice on the cross as the final and perfect sacrifice that all the sacrifices of the Bible point to and look forward to.

As we noted in our last lesson, in the story of the "binding" of Isaac, the New Testament writers saw a foreshadowing of God's offering of his only beloved Son on the Cross (see Genesis 22:12,15; [John 3:16](#)).

And it's not hard to find parallels in the two events:

A father sacrifices his only beloved son. After Ishmael was banished to the wilderness (see Genesis 21:9-14), Isaac was Abraham's only hope of posterity - "your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love" (see [Genesis 22:2](#)).

The Gospel of John uses the same language to describe the offering of Jesus. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son" (see [John 3:16](#)).

The Book of Hebrews says that Abraham was ready "to offer his only son" and that he had faith that God would raise Isaac from the dead ([Hebrews 11:17-19](#)).

And it is interesting, isn't it, that "on the third day," Isaac was rescued from death (see Genesis 22:4,11-12).

In addition to the parallel of a father offering his only son in the hope of resurrection, there are other parallels to point out.

Abraham took the wood for the holocaust and laid it on his son Isaac's shoulders ([Genesis 22:6](#)).

Jesus also is depicted as "carrying the cross himself" (see [John 19:17](#)), although, weakened by brutal beatings, he was unable to bear the weight of it the whole way (see [Mark 15:21](#)).

The victim goes willingly to his own sacrifice. Although in artwork, Isaac is often portrayed as a young boy, Jewish and Christian commentators pointed out that Isaac could not have been an unwilling victim.

He was a strong young man who could carry enough wood for a large sacrifice, and Abraham was well over a hundred years old. If Isaac had resisted at all, Abraham would not have been able to overcome him.

Like Christ, they believed, Isaac made himself an offering to God, as Jesus freely laid down his own life (see [John 10:18](#)) in obedience to His Father's will ([Mark 14:36](#)).

The sacrifice is in the mountains of Moriah. God told Abraham to "go to the land of Moriah" and sacrifice Isaac "on a height that I will point out to you" ([Genesis 22:2](#)).

Ancient tradition held that Solomon built the Temple on the spot where Abraham sacrificed Isaac (see [2 Chronicles 3:1](#)).

The place where Abraham was willing to offer his own son became the place where God's people made all their offerings.

Golgotha, outside of Jerusalem, is also associated with the mount of Moriah. And there God himself offered His own Son.

God himself provides the victim for the sacrifice. When Isaac asked his father, "where is the sheep for the holocaust?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the sheep for the holocaust" ([Genesis 22:7-8](#)).

He turned out to be right: when God's angel had stopped him from sacrificing Isaac, Abraham found a ram ready to be sacrificed instead (see [Genesis 22:10-13](#)).

For the final sacrifice, God provided as the new Lamb His only Son. As Paul said: He "did not spare His own Son but handed Him over for us all" (see [Romans 8:32](#)).

As we saw in the previous lesson, the binding of Isaac was a kind of pattern for the later sacrifice of the Passover, where once again a lamb took the place of the beloved firstborn son.

And, as we'll see, the New Testament writers were also careful to point out how closely the death of Jesus paralleled the Passover sacrifice.

B. Jesus the Passover Lamb

"For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed" ([1 Corinthians 5:7](#)).

From the very beginning, Christians have seen Christ's death on the cross as the final Passover sacrifice. In most of the languages Christians speak, the word for Easter comes from the root pasch-, which comes from the Hebrew word for Passover. (English is the rare exception: our word Easter comes from an old pagan spring festival.)

That's why we continue to call Jesus the "Lamb of God," and that's why Christ appears as a Lamb in the symbolic visions of Revelation.

The Gospel writers point out obvious parallels to show us that Christ is the definitive Passover sacrifice:

The trial and execution of Jesus took place during the Passover festival (see [Luke 22:1-2](#)). All four Gospel writers take care to note the setting.

John gives us the added detail that Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified at "about noon" on the day of preparation (see [John 19:14-16](#)).

John, the only one of the Gospel writers to note this detail, had priestly connections (see John 18:16, where John is "the other disciple" who knew the high priest).

He knew very well that the priests began to slaughter the Passover lambs at the sixth hour (that is, at noon) on the day of preparation. Clearly he means to show us that Jesus is the Passover Lamb being led to the slaughter.

None of Jesus' bones were broken. The soldiers had intended to break the legs of all the crucified criminals to make them die faster. But Jesus was already dead when the soldiers came to Him (see [John 19:31-36](#)). One of the soldiers pushed a lance into His side to make sure. His bones were not broken.

The fact is so significant to John that he feels compelled to assure us that "an eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true: he knows that he is speaking the truth, so that you also may [come to] believe" ([John 19:35](#)).

Just to make sure we get the point, John tells us that "this happened so that the scripture passage might be fulfilled: 'Not a bone of it will be broken' " ([John 19:36](#)).

The "scripture" he refers to is in the instructions for preparing the Passover lamb: "You shall not break any of its bones" ([Exodus 12:46](#); see also [Numbers 9:12](#) and [Psalm 34:20](#)).

A hyssop branch with a sponge soaked in sour wine was lifted up to Jesus on the cross (see [John 19:29](#)). Hyssop branches were used for sprinkling the blood of the Passover lamb (see [Exodus 12:22](#)).

But Jesus was not only the sacrificial victim. The sacrifice was not offered by the soldiers who beat and killed Jesus: they intended only to kill a man, not to offer a sacrifice.

No, it was Jesus Christ who offered himself as the sacrifice. As our High Priest (see Hebrews 3:1), Jesus "handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma" ([Ephesians 5:2](#)).

Paul's words remind us of [Exodus 29:18](#), where the sacrifice is being offered to consecrate Aaron's sons as priests.

What Paul intends to convey is that Christ is at once the Lamb offered in sacrifice and the High Priest who offers that sacrifice.

C. Jesus and the Todah

As we noted in our last lesson, the sacrifice of thanksgiving, or todah, was one of the most important aspects of worship at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The todah was offered in thanksgiving for deliverance from some grave danger. A good example of a todah psalm is Psalm 22. We recognize the first verse instantly: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" - the words Jesus shouted from the cross (see [Mark 15:34](#)).

It sounds like a cry of despair. But if we know the whole psalm - and the Jews who stood at the foot of the cross certainly would have known the whole psalm - we know that it ends in triumph.

The psalmist praised God for his deliverance. In adopting this psalm as among His last words, Jesus was not voicing despair but triumph: In a loud voice, He declared the certainty of God's salvation.

The todah offering was a sacrificial meal shared with friends. It included an offering of bread and wine. In fact, it resembled the sacrifice the king-priest Melchizedek shared with Abraham in thanksgiving for the rescue of the people of Salem (see [Genesis 14:18-20](#)).

Ancient rabbis taught that, after the coming of the Messiah, all sacrifices would cease except the todah, which would never cease to be offered throughout all eternity.

Or, to use terms that would have been familiar to the millions of Greek-speaking Jews in New Testament times: After the coming of the Christ, all sacrifices would cease except the Eucharist. For the Greek word eucharistia, like todah, means "thanksgiving," and in fact some Jewish writers used eucharistia to translate the Hebrew todah.

III. Christ's Sacrifice and the Mass

A. Covenant Love

When Jesus turned to go to Jerusalem for the last time, He knew He was going there to die (see [Matthew 20:17-19](#)). His disciples knew it, too ([John 11:16](#)).

Jesus arrived in Jerusalem in time for the Passover, and he made plans to celebrate the Passover meal with his twelve disciples (see [Mark 14:12-16](#)).

Three of the four Gospel writers preserve Jesus' words and actions from that meal. Those words and deeds are still remembered in every Eucharistic celebration. This practice began early, as we can tell from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. There he recalls Jesus taking bread and wine, saying that they were His body and blood and adding: "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." (see [1 Corinthians 11:23-26](#)).

In the accounts of Matthew and Mark, in giving His disciples the cup Jesus also says, "this is my blood of the covenant" ([Matthew 26:28](#); [Mark 14:24](#)).

These words are a deliberate echo of a crucial sacrifice in Old Testament history – the sacrifice Moses offered to celebrate God's covenant with Israel following the Exodus from Egypt.

After Moses reads "the book of the covenant" and the people profess their faith in it, Moses takes the blood of sacrificial bulls and sprinkles it on the people. As he does so, he uses the words that Jesus quotes in the Last Supper: "This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words of His" (see [Exodus 24:5-8](#)).

Jesus and his disciples had been celebrating a traditional Passover meal. But Jesus introduced something new, something that recalled the bloody sacrifices of the Old Testament, but in form resembled the unbloody sacrifice of the todah.

B. The Order of Melchizedek

The sacrifice offered at the Last Supper recalled that made by the priest-king Melchizedek – who likewise offered bread and wine (see [Genesis 14:18](#)).

The Book of Hebrews interprets Melchizedek as a sign that foreshadowed Christ.

The whole of Hebrews 7 is a meditation on what it means for Christ to be a priest "according to the order of Melchizedek" (see also [Hebrews 5:8-10](#)).

Like Melchizedek, Christ offers bread and wine; but His sacrifice is infinitely greater, because the bread and wine are His own body and blood.

More than that, He has given His followers a way of participating in that sacrifice. At that Passover meal, Jesus offered the first Mass.

And because of that, Christ's priesthood is infinitely greater than the old priesthood of Israel.

Those priests died, and their sacrifices could never save us from sin, but Christ lives forever, and His one sacrifice defeated sin and death for all time.

"The main point of what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man, set up" ([Hebrews 8:1-2](#)).

C. One Eternal Sacrifice

The death of the Lord: this is what the Eucharist celebrates. We hear it at every Mass, but the first Christians could hardly have missed the irony.

Christ, our Lord, has been brutally tortured and slaughtered, and we celebrate that event in a ceremony called the Eucharist - that is, the "Thanksgiving."

Why are we thankful? Because Christ's death was not meaningless. It was a sacrifice offered for all of us. Our Eucharist, like the ancient todah, is a sacrifice of thanksgiving for God's delivering us from death.

That the death of Christ on the cross was, strictly speaking, a sacrifice - that is, an offering of the same nature as the Old Testament sacrifices, though surpassing and fulfilling them all - was never doubted by the early Christians.

The entire letter to the Hebrews, for example, is filled with the image of Christ as at once High Priest and sacrifice.

[Hebrews 9:13-14](#) compares the sacrifices of animals to the sacrifice of Christ, who "offered himself without blemish" as a pure sacrifice.

St. Paul also describes Christ's death as a sacrifice in many of his letters (see, for example, [Ephesians 5:2](#); [2 Corinthians 5:21](#)).

We've seen how the Gospel writers, especially John, carefully point out the parallels between the Passover sacrifice and the death of Christ on the cross.

Finally, the image of the "Lamb who was slain" from Revelation makes no sense unless the Lamb was slain as a sacrifice.

This sacrifice of Christ on the cross is the final sacrifice, once and for all.

It happened at a definite time in history, and it will not happen again. All the Old Testament sacrifices looked forward to this one.

Again, we find this belief expressed in Hebrews.

The author explains that the Israelites offered the same sacrifices year after year, but those sacrifices could "never make [them] perfect" or righteous before God.

That's why they had to keep offering them. If the sacrifices could have wiped away their sins, there would have been no need to continue offering them.

"But in those sacrifices there is only a yearly remembrance of sins, for it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats take away sins" ([Hebrews 10:1-4](#)).

None of the sacrifices Israel's priests offered could take away the sins of the people.

But Jesus offered himself as "one sacrifice for sins" and by this "one offering He has made perfect forever" not only the Israelites but all men and ([Hebrews 10:11-14](#)).

Only the one sacrifice of Christ could truly make us God's holy people, and His one sacrifice was made "once for all" (see [Hebrews 10:10](#)).

D. Representing the Cross

Then how can we call the Mass a sacrifice?

We can say that the Mass is a sacrifice because Christ instituted the Eucharist to make that final sacrifice available to us for all time.

Christ is not sacrificed again in the Mass. But because Christ is really present in the Eucharist, the Mass is a participation in His one great sacrifice.

The Mass re-presents that sacrifice, making it present to us and making us part of it. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross cannot happen again because it is still happening today in the Eucharist. The sacrifice is eternal, and every Mass is part of it.

Notice the difference between "re-presenting" and "representing."

In modern English, to say that one thing "represents" another usually means that the first thing stands for the second. A word represents the thing it names, and an elected official represents the people who elect him. But the word is not the thing, and the elected official is not the people.

When we say that the Mass "re-presents" the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, however, we go back to the root meaning of the word.

The Mass presents that sacrifice again, making it present to us right now. All over the world, wherever the Eucharist is being celebrated, God's people are present at the one eternal sacrifice of the Lamb.

E. Priests Offering Sacrifice

Each member of God's people has been made a member of the "holy priesthood" of the Church (see [1 Peter 2:4-5,9](#); [Revelation 1:6](#)) as Israel was once called "a kingdom of priests" (see [Exodus 19:6](#))

Each of us is called to "offer spiritual sacrifices" (see [1 Peter 2:4-5](#)).

As Christ offered himself on the cross, we are called to offer our own bodies, our own lives in the Mass. United to Christ in baptism, we share in his priesthood. With him, we also offer ourselves as a sacrifice.

"I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship" (see [Romans 12:1](#)).

And in this spiritual worship we are united with all Christians everywhere who celebrate the same sacrament. We are also united with all the saints in heaven - all Christians, across time, sharing in one perfect sacrifice.

In fact, the Mass is heaven on earth, not figuratively but literally. That will be the subject of the next lesson: the surprising, even astonishing fact that, wherever Mass is being celebrated, heaven is there right now.

IV. Study Questions

1. Why did Christian and Jewish interpreters conclude that Isaac must have gone willingly to his own sacrifice?
2. Why is it significant that Pilate sent Jesus to His death at "about noon" on the day of preparation?
3. To what Old Testament sacrifice do Jesus' words "my blood of the covenant" refer?
4. Why does John take such care to point out that none of Jesus' bones were broken?
5. How many times is the sacrifice of Christ offered?
6. What is the difference between "representing" and "re-presenting" Christ's sacrifice?

For prayer and reflection:

Do you remember the story of the first Passover? (See Exodus 12.) At Sunday Mass, try relating the Passover - the salvation of Israel's firstborn - to the drama of salvation being enacted in front of you.

Do you "discern the body" in the Eucharist? Read [1 Corinthians 11:23-32](#) again. Consider reading the Passion narrative in John, especially [John 19:13-37](#), as a preparation before Mass.