

+ Isaiah 53:6 + The Perfect Sacrifice + Good Friday + 18 April 2014 +

You don't send a sheep into battle. You don't send a lamb to war. Try sending a flock of sheep into battle and others would question the wisdom of your plan and perhaps even your sanity. Why not something fast like a horse or a camel? Why not something smart like a dog? Why not something big and powerful like an elephant? Why not something ferocious with the ability to attack the enemy and defend itself like a lion or a tiger or a bear?

...But a sheep? It's no good on the battlefield. In fact, it's more of a danger to itself. It has no ability to defend itself and no awareness of danger. It's small and weak. It's helpless against predators. It falls into rushing streams and gets washed away. It gets so focused on the next tasty tuft of grass that it blindly wanders away from the safety of the flock and the shepherd. It happily wanders around in circles going nowhere. It's a very foolish animal that does silly things and is only a danger to itself even in the most peaceful circumstances.

Yet they're so much like us. Yes, at times, you and I might think we're big and strong. We think we can handle anything—even danger to our souls. We think we can fight back and even pull ourselves up by our own boot straps. If we get lost, we think we can always find our way back. We think we would never be as foolish and helpless as sheep, or would we? There's a reason why the prophet wrote those painful words, ***"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way..."*** As we ponder the suffering and death of our Savior Jesus tonight, that stark reality becomes all too clear.

When faced with the power of temptation, I'm no match. So I blindly chase after it with no awareness at all of the danger around me or how far I wander away from the God who cares for me. When faced with the overwhelming pressure of our sinful world, you're no match. It consumes you like it has so many other souls. When faced with the deceitful attacks of Satan, we're weak. We're powerless. We're helpless against ***"the roaring lion looking for someone"*** to carry off and devour in the fires of hell. (1 Peter 5:8)

Why can't we defend ourselves? Inside each and every one of us is a traitor, a betrayer who gladly and foolishly hands us over to sin, to Satan, to the sinful world with no attempt to fight back on our part. We're incapable of paying attention to the constant danger around us and within us. We're quickly swept away with everyone else rushing headlong into hell. In the meantime, you and I do foolish things. How often don't you look back on your day and ask yourself, "Why did I do that?" or "Why didn't I do that?" You and I keep going around in circles always returning to cherished sins of weakness and familiar temptations. We wander off far away from our Good Shepherd and his flock chasing after that next juicy temptation until we find ourselves alone and helpless. Then the consequences of sin come crushing down like the razor-sharp teeth of a wolf, and we're broken. We're bleeding. We're dying and can't possibly help or save ourselves, and death haunts our every turn waiting for the right time to finish us off. ***"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way..."***

You don't send a sheep into battle. You send it to the shearer or to the slaughterhouse. You don't send a lamb to war, but it is perfect for a sacrifice. Look back on the history of God's Old Testament people and you will see how truly important a lamb was. For the ancient Israelites yearning for freedom in Egypt, the blood of a lamb was the difference between life and death. It was the blood of a year-old, male lamb without defect that served notice to the angel of death to pass over their homes as he wiped out the firstborn of Egypt. It was the meat of a lamb that they would eat every spring in remembrance of God's gracious deliverance.

For the ancient Israelites who traveled to the temple in Jerusalem, lambs and sheep, goats and cattle were sacrificed daily in the fires of the altar as burnt offerings for sin to the holy God. Blood shed symbolized sins forgiven, and no day of sacrifice was greater than the annual Day of Atonement, when two young male goats were chosen for a special purpose. One was sacrificed with its blood sprinkled on everything because blood shed symbolizes sins forgiven. With bloody hands on the head of the other goat, the high priest would confess the sins of the people and then the goat bearing all those sins would be abandoned in the wilderness to remind the people how God would take away the guilt of their sins forever.

The words of the prophet condemn us for being the sheep that we are—foolish and straying and willingly wandering away, but they give us hope because the Lord saves us through the sacrifice of another Lamb. ***"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."***

When all we were doing was foolishly wandering around in blind circles and getting ourselves consumed by sin and Satan, while we did a fantastic job of being soundly defeated, the Lord of free and faithful grace sent a

Lamb, his Lamb, into battle. This Lamb of God was not weak, although he did not make full use of his almighty power. This Lamb of God was not helpless against our predatory enemies, although he allowed himself to be attacked and beaten, condemned and killed with all the pain and suffering that Satan, the sinful world, and death could throw at him. This Lamb of God did not wander from the path of righteousness laid out for him, although the countless sheep he came to save loved to wander into death traps. This Lamb of God was perfect for fighting this battle, because he would be the perfect sacrifice for sheep like you and me.

“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way...” We see the foolish wandering of our sins, but then one last statement falls like a wall of doom crushing down not on us, but on the Lamb of God. ***“...And the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*** All the guilt you’ve built up, all the foolishness you’ve done, all the selfishness you’ve cherished, all the iniquity that has caused all of us to fall short of God’s required holiness, every consequence of every single sin all the way back to our first parents came crushing down on the Lamb of God. The Lord of free and faithful grace piled it on letting the Lamb feel the pain of every last sin. Is it any wonder why Jesus in the midst of the pitch-black darkness cried out from the cross, ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*** (Matthew 27:46) Yet at that moment, the Lord of free and faithful grace, the holy God was turning away from his sin-crushed Lamb and turning his love and grace towards you and me—his wandering sheep.

The Lord of free and faithful grace laid the crushing ***“iniquity of us all”*** on the almighty shoulders of the Lamb of God, and then it was done. The Lamb cried out, ***“It is finished”*** (John 19:30), and committing his spirit into his heavenly Father’s hands, Jesus bowed his head and died. The perfect sacrifice was made, and God’s holy justice was satisfied. The earth shook. The rocks split. The heavy curtain in the temple that separated sinful humanity from the holy God was torn in two. Even faithful believers who had died were restored to life. The battle was over and the Lamb by his sacrifice had won.

Now his sacrifice on Good Friday is your victory. Your ransom has been paid with the holy, precious blood of the Lamb of God. You have been declared righteous, not guilty, innocent because the Lamb bore all your iniquities. You have peace with God because ***“the punishment that brought us peace was upon Jesus, and by his wounds we are healed.”*** (Isaiah 53:5)

Now do you see why Good Friday is so “good”? The Lamb of God bore the punishment for all our foolish wandering and won the victory. ***“He was crushed for our iniquities”*** (Isaiah 53:5), yet we receive all the blessings, all the grace, all the mercy from the hand of our God. He was sacrificed, so we might live, so we might have peace with God, so we might stop our foolish wandering and follow him by faith on the path of righteousness that brings us to heaven.

In the end, there was no other way. There was no other plan no matter how foolish it seemed to send a Lamb into battle or how costly it would be that God himself would have to be the sacrifice for our sins. There was no other Savior. There was no other sacrifice that could be made. So we see the Lamb of God willingly and without complaint go into the final battle tonight to be the perfect sacrifice for you and me. ***“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise”*** (Revelation 5:12) for ***“the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*** Amen.