

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Hale was an amazing woman. Widowed at age 34 with five children, she went on to start a magazine and wrote over 30 books. She is basically responsible for Thanksgiving being a national holiday. But one of her most notable accomplishments was a poem she published in 1823 about a little girl named Mary and her lamb.

According to one account she was a school teacher near Boston in 1814. One of her students, Mary Shaw was only 8 years old when she found a newborn lamb in a cold barn one morning. For some reason the lamb’s mother had forsaken her, so young Mary took the lamb and fed it and kept it warm. The lamb became Mary’s pet and they were inseparable. Once the lamb followed Mary to school and she hid it under a blanket. When it was time for Mary to stand up and recite, the lamb emerged from under the blanket. The children laughed, but Sarah Hale put the lamb outside the school. When school dismissed the lamb was waiting for Mary. (*Animal Land, True Stories*, Judson Press, 1925 p. 144)

Thus, Sarah Hale was inspired to write the little poem that most people know by heart:

Mary had a little lamb;
Its fleece was white as snow;
And everywhere that Mary went,
The lamb was sure to go.

(Everyone knows those lines, but the original poem had other verses.)

It followed her to school one day,
Which was against the rule;
It made the children laugh and play
To see a lamb at school.

And so the teacher turned it out;
But still it lingered near,
And waited patiently about
Till Mary did appear.

And then it ran to her and laid
Its head upon her arm;
As if to say, “I’m not afraid.
You’ll keep me from all harm.”

“What makes the lamb love Mary so?”
The eager children cry;
“Oh, Mary loves the lamb, you know,”
The teacher did reply.

And you each gentle animal
In confidence may bind,
And make them follow at your will,
If you are only kind.

I’m entitling this message “Mary Had a Little Lamb” because our scripture today speaks of a Lamb. So, with apologies to Sarah Hale, here’s another version of “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

Mary had a little Lamb,
He was born on Christmas day.
She laid him in a manger bed
To Sleep upon the hay.

Angels filled the night-time sky
And they began to sing.
Shepherds heard them all proclaim
The birthday of a King.

Wise men saw a blazing star
Up in the sky that night.
They followed it until they found
The King of love and light.

Mary had a little Lamb,
But He wasn’t hers, you know,
He was the very Son of God,
The One who loves us so.

The Father of this little Lamb
Loved the world so much
That He sent his only Son to earth
So we could feel His touch.

He came to give us joy and peace
And take away our sin.
So when He knocks on your heart’s door,
Be sure to let Him in.

Why do I love this precious Lamb?
What can the reason be?
The answer is quite plain to see,
It’s because He first loved me!

Let’s read the passage of scripture about Mary’s little lamb, who was Jesus, the Lamb of God. Our text begins in 1 Peter 1:18: “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.”

Let’s consider two important truths about the Lamb of God.

I. JESUS WAS A SPECIAL LAMB

Jesus was different from anyone who ever walked on planet earth. History is filled with religious teachers who had an impact on their generation and even generations today. There are thousands of Buddhists who try to follow the words of Buddha. Millions of Muslims are devoted to following the words and teaching of Mohammed. Several million Mormons are convinced

Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God. But Jesus was so much more than merely a religious teacher. He was the only man who ever was called the Lamb of God. There are many distinctive characteristics that place Jesus in a special category, but consider only three elements that make Him unique.

A. He had a unique conception—born of a virgin!

Some modern and post-modern Christians suggest the doctrine of the virgin birth is not important, but I disagree. The fact that Jesus was born of a virgin sets Him apart from every other person who has ever breathed the air surrounding planet earth. 750 years before it happened, the prophet Isaiah had predicted: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14)

Some scholars enjoy pointing out that the Hebrew word there doesn’t literally mean “virgin” rather it means “young girl.” That’s correct, but it means a “young girl never married.” This is the exact verse the angel quoted to Joseph to explain to him WHY Mary was pregnant.

In Bible times, an unmarried woman cherished her virginity and it was extremely rare if a bride was not a virgin. Sadly, our culture has reversed that trend. Today, we’re told unmarried virgins are rare...and rare things are valuable, so to all you unmarried girls, remember your virginity is the most valuable thing you can give to your husband.

I love the famous painting by the Spanish artist, Estaban Murrillo entitled, “The Annunciation.” Gabriel is seen appearing before Mary to announce she had been chosen by God to bear a son—but not just any son. He told her, “You are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High...and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:31-33)

Mary’s first concern was *how* that could happen because she claimed she was a virgin. God knows the hearts of all people and He would never have chosen a liar to bear His child. So, by Mary’s own confession she *was* a virgin. In the painting, the Holy Spirit is symbolized by the dove in the center. Gabriel explained, “The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” (Luke 1:35) And sweet Mary, said, “May it be to me as you have said.” (Luke 1:38) And because of this arrangement, Jesus was the only person born with an earthly mother, but He had no earthly father. He was born with a human nature and with a divine nature.

B. He possessed a unique character—without blemish!

Peter wrote in our text that Jesus was a Lamb “without blemish or defect.” Lambs were important in the life of the Jews. They used the wool for clothing, and ate them for food. During Jesus’ lifetime there were tens of thousands of lambs being tended by thousands of shepherds. Lambs were used in the Jewish sacrificial systems as well. Lambs were offered as sin offerings. The Old Testament made it clear lambs used for sacrifice had to be without blemish. For instance we learn in Leviticus that a sacrificial lamb had to be a male lamb, one year old (the prime of

life), and it couldn't have any defects. Jesus fulfilled these requirements since He was a male and He died at age 33, which some consider to the prime of life. Jesus met the third requirement because he was morally pure: there was no spot or blemish on His character. He was sinless.

I love to read about the great characters of the Bible, because the Bible doesn't try to cover up their mistakes and sins. Noah was a great man, but he got drunk and laid around naked—two of his sons had to cover him up. When he woke up he cursed his other son for looking at him naked.

Abraham was a great man, but when he visited Egypt, he lied and said Sarah was his sister instead of his wife. Jacob was a man of faith, but he had history of dirty deals. Moses did some great things, but he murdered a man. King David, a man after God's own heart, committed adultery and murder. Even the big fisherman writing this letter denied he knew Jesus and cursed in front of a teenage girl. The Bible is about real people who made tons of real mistakes.

But Jesus was not just one more fallen man in a long line of fallen men. He was God in the flesh, and as Pilate said at His trial, “I find no fault in this man.” As Judas Iscariot testified, “I have betrayed innocent blood!” There has only been one man born of woman who lived His entire life without a sinful thought, a sinful deed, or a sinful word—Jesus.

You may be thinking, “Yeah, but He had an “edge” He was God—He was holy.” Friend, the Bible says Jesus faced temptation in exactly the same way we do: in the flesh. We read in Hebrews 4:15: “We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.” How many of you have been *tempted* to sin this past week? Thanks for being honest. Every single temptation you face, Jesus has already faced. To those of you who struggle with alcohol and drugs, Jesus felt the same temptation to abuse His body. To those of you who struggle with the grip of pornography on the Internet, Jesus faced the same dark temptation of lust. For those of you who are tempted to cheat on your expense report, Jesus faced the same temptation. For those of you who hate people because of their skin color, He knows how you feel—He faced it, too. He faced them all, yet He didn't sin. To those of you who are tempted to worry, yep, He faced it. To those of you who are tempted to be proud in thinking you're better than others; He dealt with it. He faced every sin you'll ever imagine, and some you'll never even imagine, yet He never sinned.

C. He made a unique claim—Pre-existent!

Peter writes that Mary's little lamb, Jesus was “chosen before the foundation of the world.” If I sat down with you and asked you to tell me about your life, you might tell me where you were born and where you grew up. But what if I asked you to tell me about your life 1,000 years ago? Or 10,000 years ago? You'd think that I was as nutty as a fruitcake—one egg short of a nog—one enchilada short of a combination platter; choose your metaphor. None of us have any knowledge previous to our birth. No so with Jesus. He claimed to have a pre-existent experience in heaven with His Father.

Once, Jesus was in the Temple debating with some of the religious experts. They were proud of the fact that they were children of Abraham. Jesus then made an audacious claim. He said, “Your father, Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” (John 8:56)

At that, the Jewish leaders exploded with indignation. They said, “You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?” (John 8:57) Notice the reply of Jesus. He said, “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58) He used that divine name that God had given Moses. God told Moses, “Tell him that I AM has sent you.” That’s the name Jesus took for Himself. The Jews understood exactly what He was saying because the Bible says they took up stones to kill Him on the spot. But it wasn’t His time yet, so they were unable to touch Him. Jesus was totally unique in that He claimed to have been alive with the Father from the beginning of the beginning. Can anyone else claim that?

But the main thing Peter is communicating here is that:

II. JESUS IS THE SAVING LAMB

This point is in the present tense because Jesus is so much more than just some historical character who has died and been remembered. He is alive today! Jesus isn’t just some notable religious teacher who left a body of teachings for us to study. He came to die. From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus understood that He was to be the Lamb of God who would give His life for our sins. When John the Baptist pointed Him out, He cried out in John 1:29, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” There are many things that Jesus can do for you, but notice just two Peter mentions in this passage:

A. He redeems you with His precious blood

Peter wrote, “It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” The word “redeem” means to “purchase back.” It was word used in the slave trade. As the Romans conquered nations and tribes, they brought thousands of slaves back to Rome. These slaves were put on the slave block and sold for gold and silver. In the same way, we were all slaves to sin, and we were placed on the auction block. Something much more valuable than gold or silver was used to purchase our freedom—it was the precious blood of Christ.

The Bible says in the book of Hebrews, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” (Hebrews 9:22). Can you recall the first time blood was shed in the Bible? It was in the Garden of Eden. God placed Adam and Eve in a perfect environment, but He had set some limits. He told them not to eat the fruit of one particular tree. They were tempted and they sinned. At that moment they became aware of the different between right and wrong, good and evil, goodness and wickedness. They realized they were naked and they were embarrassed. They tried to cover themselves with fig leaves, but it didn’t work. They hid from God. When He encountered them, God announced the consequences of their disobedience. Then Genesis 3:21 says, “And the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” There was no death, yet, so these skins didn’t come from animals who were already dead. God had to kill them in order to cover the guilt of Adam and Eve. The Bible doesn’t say what kind of animal skins God used, but don’t be surprised to get to heaven and find out that it was a lamb that was killed to cover the guilt and sin of our forefathers. After all, God is consistent, and it is the precious blood of the Lamb of God which covers us and cleanses us from our sin.

If you don't think blood is valuable, try living without it. I asked a doctor recently what was so valuable about blood, and without getting too technical, he told me life is sustained in the blood. (Leviticus 12:11 says, "life is in the blood.") Blood carries oxygen and nutrients to all parts of the body. That's why we have blood drives. This week I visited with Dick Baker, who has pancreatic cancer, he was receiving a unit of blood. He told me to say, "thank you" to all the people at Green Acres who have given blood. That's how precious all blood is for physical life, but the blood of Jesus gives spiritual life as well. The *only* currency God accepts for the forgiveness of sin is the blood of Jesus.

When we get to heaven, we aren't going to rejoice over the teachings of Jesus, or over the miracles of Jesus, we are going to worship Him because He shed His precious blood to purchase our salvation. In the last book of the Bible we read: "They fell down before the Lamb...and they sang a new song: 'You are worthy...because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'" (Revelation 4:8-9)

B. He rescues you from your painful past

Let's go back to the slave block for a moment. When a slave was "redeemed" with gold and silver, the new owner could do one of three things. First, he could use the slave as his personal servant for the rest of the slave's life. Second, he could purchase the slave and then let the slave work to purchase his own freedom from the new master. Or third, the Master could purchase the slave and set him free. In rare cases we read of an owner purchasing a slave, giving them their freedom and then adopting them into their family. That's what Jesus does. He has purchased your freedom, and then He sets you free and makes you a part of His family.

We read in Revelation again: "To him who loves us and has FREED us from our sins by his blood—to him be glory and power for ever and ever!" (Revelation 1:6) Peter says in verse 18 that we have been redeemed from "the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers." Before you are redeemed your life is empty. Your calendar may be full, but your life is empty. The Lamb of God has shed His precious blood so you can experience a life of fullness and joy.

One Sunday morning, the great pastor, Dr. A.J. Gordon surprised his Boston congregation by setting an old rusty birdcage on the pulpit. It was empty and the door to the bird cage was open. Dr. Gordon told the congregation about meeting a dirty faced little boy the day before. The boy was holding the birdcage containing several frightened sparrows he had trapped. Dr. Gordon asked the boy what he was going to do with the birds. The little boy said, "Oh, I just like playing with them, poking them with this stick, and watching them flutter around the cage." Dr. Gordon said, "Then what are you going to do with them?" The boy said, "I don't know. I suppose I'll kill them." Dr. Gordon said, "Would you like to sell them?" The boy replied, "Mister, you don't want these birds, they're just old field sparrows."

The pastor said, "I know what they are, would you take \$5 for them?" The boy was amazed, "Five dollars! Sure! For that price you can have the cage, too." The little boy walked off laughing about his windfall. Then Dr. Gordon took the cage and opened the door. At first the frightened birds huddled on the bottom, but as he gently tapped the bottom they began to stir. Then one by one, the sparrows came to the door of the cage and perched there for a moment, and

then they spread their wings and flew away. As they flew away, the birds began to chirp and sing. Dr. Gordon told his congregation that as the birds circled the sky it was as if they were singing, “Redeemed, redeemed, redeemed!”

The devil had similar plans for a fallen race of sinners. Jesus said the thief has come to steal, kill, and destroy. (John 10:10) Jesus came along and offered to redeem us from the curse of sin. He knew all the gold and silver in the world would never pay the price, so He offered the silver of His tears and the gold of His precious blood. He has bought us—redeemed. And then He opens the door of the future and gives us wings of faith so we can fly singing, “Redeemed, redeemed, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb; Redeemed, redeemed; His child and forever I am.”

CONCLUSION

During this time of year, you see a lot of Christmas trees. I’m taking an unofficial survey. How many of you have an artificial Christmas tree? How many of you have a live tree in your home? Really? You have a live Christmas tree? Do you mean your Christmas tree is alive and has roots growing down into the dirt? Most “live” Christmas trees aren’t live at all—they’ve been cut off at ground level. A live Christmas tree looks pretty plain, but take the same tree when it’s dead and decorate it and the dead tree looks better than the living tree—but it won’t for long because it’s been cut off at the source of life.

You may be wondering if I’m one of those tree huggers. Nope. There is a powerful point here if you’ll pay attention. People are like Christmas trees. Some people are like the second tree, they look pretty good. They have adorned their lives with all kinds of trappings: education, money, awards, and human accomplishments. But sadly, they have no connection with the source of life—Jesus Christ. What do you do with old Christmas trees that were once living? They get tossed out. The same thing happens to people who reject the source of life—Jesus.

Jesus said, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life.” (John 3:36) That first tree didn’t look as fancy as the decorated tree but it was alive. Which one of those trees represents your life? When you trust your present and your future to Jesus—Mary’s Little Lamb, and the wonderful Lamb of God, you’ll find real life.

OUTLINE

I. JESUS WAS A SPECIAL LAMB

A. Unique conception—born of a virgin!

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. *Isaiah 7:14*

B. Unique character—without blemish!

We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. *Hebrews 4:15*

C. Unique claim—Pre-existent!

I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" *John 8:58*

II. JESUS IS THE SAVING LAMB

A. He redeems you with His precious blood

"They fell down before the Lamb...and they sang a new song: 'You are worthy...because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'" *Revelation 4:8-9*

B. He rescues you from your painful past

To him who loves us and has FREED us from our sins by his blood—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! *Revelation 1:6*



DISCLAIMER: These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. There is no legal copyright on this material. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes