

ADVENT: WEEK THREE

day 16

Born in a Barn

Luke 2:1-7; Genesis 15:9-21;
John 1:29; Matthew 27:45-51



If you had grown up near Jerusalem at the time of Christ, you would have heard the sound of a shofar (ram's horn trumpet) being blown every day at 9:00 AM as a sacrifice was being offered to God on your behalf. Every day a pure, spotless lamb would be killed, and its blood would be shed, as a sacrifice for the sins of God's people. It was a reminder that you deserved to die, but God had made a way for another to die in your place.

Then, six hours later, you would again hear the shofar, this time at 3:00 PM, and again another perfect lamb was being slaughtered on your behalf. The blood of yet another lamb was being spilled so that you could be forgiven and continue to live the life God had given you.

Underneath those daily reminders was a story that every Jewish child knew backwards and forwards before they were out of childhood. Israel's sacrifice system was rooted in the covenant formed between God and Abram in Genesis 15. God told Abram that if he would be obedient, Abram would have land and descendants, and all nations would be blessed through him. Indeed, that is what happened, for one of Abram's descendants was Jesus, the Messiah, Who brought the hope of salvation to the whole world.

When forming a covenant in ancient days, two parties gathered animals, cut each of the larger animals into two parts, and then placed them on the ground so there were two lines of body parts, and arranged them so their blood flowed into one stream. Then each party walked through the bloody path, turning left and coming back to the starting point, then walked it again and turned right before coming back to the starting point...like a figure eight (the symbol of infinity). That walk symbolized two things: first, it symbolically stated that this covenant was eternal, and they were committed to honoring this covenant as long as they lived. Second, this act symbolized that they were now connected...the two had become one, just like those animals had been one whole creature, and whoever broke the terms of the covenant would pay with their life.

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When it was Abram's turn to walk, Genesis 15:12 says he was filled with "a thick and dreadful darkness". This Hebrew expression describes someone who is scared to death. Abram knew that he could not live up to the terms of God's covenant, and he knew that he would have to pay with his life when he broke the covenant.

BUT...instead of making Abram walk the bloodpath, God walked through the path FOR him! God knew even better than Abram that no mortal could keep the covenant, so God's actions effectively said, "If either you or I break this covenant, I will pay for it with my own blood." This was an incredibly loving God saying, "When you fall short of the terms of the covenant, I WILL TAKE THE PUNISHMENT."

So when the shofar sounded, all of that symbolism was wrapped up in that sound. But only a few every understood that God wasn't satisfied with this arrangement. King David understood. Ezekiel understood. Every so often one of the prophets would realize that God had another plan, one that would end the system of sacrifice once and for all by offering the perfect sacrifice...but most people missed it. So fast forward a couple thousand years from Abram to John the Baptist who announces Jesus as "the LAMB of God Who takes away the sin of the world." Do you remember what the angel told Joseph when that poor, confused man was trying to decide if he should go through with his marriage to Mary? The angel said that Jesus would "save His people from their sins." And sure enough, 33 years after He was born, Jesus played the part of that sacrificial lamb as He hung on a cross on Calvary.

Oh, this is precious! This is God making sure that EVERYONE could see what was really going on...for they put Him on the cross at 9:00 AM, the time of the morning sacrifice. And at exactly 3:00 P.M. (the time of the evening sacrifice), Jesus cried out, "It is finished!". And the veil in the temple was torn in half, and now everyone had access to the throne of grace, had access to the Father, had access to full and complete forgiveness with no further sacrifice ever being necessary!

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BUT...Jesus didn't just play the part of the sacrificial lamb on the day He was crucified. You see, in addition to those two sacrifices that were made every morning and every evening, there were thousands upon thousands of other sacrifices made throughout the year. Vast herds were needed to supply the Temple in Jerusalem with the countless sacrificial lambs they needed...and those herds were kept nearby in Bethlehem. Thousands of sacrificial lambs had been birthed there, in those fields and barns and caves that dotted the countryside. And on the night of Jesus' birth, God made sure that the perfect sacrificial lamb was born exactly where a sacrificial lamb should be born...IN A BARN.

Want to embrace Christmas? Embrace the grace that causes Almighty God to make a covenant with you while knowing you can't keep it. Embrace the relief that comes from ending your efforts toward self-righteousness, and from surrendering to the love that would let you get in on His righteousness. Embrace that love that caused Jesus to give Himself for you...BEFORE demanding that you give yourself to Him. Advent is embracing the privilege of admitting that you are so incredibly in need of a SAVIOR...and embracing the amazing privilege of celebrating that you have one!

prayer:

Dear Jesus, thank You for being my sacrificial Lamb! Please help me to forsake the burden of self-righteousness and fully revel in Your righteousness so freely given to me. Help me never forget the wonder of Your love for me! In Jesus' name, amen.

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