

Jesus and the Day of Atonement

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[0 : 0 0] me begin by saying that looking closely at the Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16, can be challenging. I was reminded of that from a couple of books from different perspectives. Andrew Wilson wrote a book called *The Making of the Modern World*, and he speaks about modern Western people, and he gives 100 markers, things that will be true if we are from the modern West, and one of those is that we will most likely never have seen an animal be sacrificed. Now, that may not be true of us because we're not all from the West, but most of us will not have seen animal sacrifice. On the flip side, I shared with you last week the account of the slave Alouda Aquiano back in the 18th century, and when he arrived in the UK, landing in Falmouth in Cornwall in 1759, there were two things that struck him very quickly. He arrived in December 1st. There was snow, and he'd never seen snow, and he was surprised by the snow, but he was more surprised when he first went into a church because he found himself asking, where's the animal sacrifice? So he was raised in a traditional African religion that centered on animal sacrifice, and he didn't see it.

This is a reminder to us that from whatever point of view, wherever we come from in the world, it can be a real challenge as we come to think about Old Testament worship, and especially, I think, as we come to think about the Old Testament system of sacrifice. It can seem foreign and strange to us. It is not part of our religious practice. Perhaps we can be squeamish and uncomfortable about the detail, all the blood and the killing and the sprinkling, but let me say that we need to look closely at texts like these, as much as we might like to turn away and move on, because the truths that we find on the Day of Atonement take us to the heart of the Christian faith. What does it mean that God has provided a way for our sin to be covered and removed? Why is it good news that the heart of the Christian faith is the statement that Christ died for our sins? And so the Day of Atonement is going to help us to see that God forgives our sin freely, but there is great cost. And as we think about the cross, we understand the cost comes to God Himself and to Jesus, His beloved Son. So as we come to Leviticus 16, we come to the Day of Atonement, we see it as promise, the promise of Jesus' sacrificial death, which represents the fulfillment of everything we have in our text, that the animal sacrifice is a shadow preparing us for the reality that Jesus would come to be that perfect once-for-all sacrifice. And our goal today, as we spend some time in this text, is that we might together have a sense of serious joy.

It's a somber thing, but it's a joyful thing, like Psalm 32, as we consider the cost of being pardoned and forgiven as we look again at the death of Christ for our sins. So we're going to do three things together. One, we're going to think briefly about the terms and conditions of the Day of Atonement, because they matter. We're going to think about the significance of the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement, and then we'll think about how Jesus fulfills what the Day of Atonement promises.

First, let's think about terms and conditions. With any contract, with any deal, if you listen to any advertising, we know that there's always T's and C's that apply. And if we fail to read the terms, maybe you've had this experience, you might find yourself paying more than you expected, you miss out on the deal you thought you had arranged, you find that you are penalized in some way.

It is absolutely true also of the Day of Atonement. Okay, this is the high point, one of the high points in Israel's religious life, happens every year. It's absolutely the high point in the ministry, the service of the high priest. It's the one day in the year that he gets to go behind the curtain into the presence of God. But it is essential that God's terms and conditions are followed exactly.

[4 : 41] If the holy God is to accept the sacrifice, if the perfect God can live among sinful people, then his terms and conditions must be kept. So, we're going to think about five of them and see why they matter. First, and this is in verses 1 and 2, God says both who is to come and when they are to come. So, verse 1 introduces a problem. The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord. These sons were Nadab and Abihu. They thought they could come into God's presence however they pleased, that they could offer what the Bible describes as strange or unholy fire, and God judged them and they were struck down. And so, the message comes through Moses that Aaron may come. He is the high priest, so he may come, but he has to pay attention to God's timetable. God says when he may come right into his presence.

And we're told why this matters. It says there at the end of verse 2, He can't come whenever he chooses or else he will die, for I will appear in the cloud.

It's a reminder to the people of God. God is pure and God is holy. God is present, represented by the cloud. So, people are not free to rush in and to choose however they want to worship, because God is awesome in the true sense of the word. Moving beyond that, God also says how the high priest is to come. We read there verses 3 to 6. Three different things. There must be the proper sacrifices. So, notice this high priest is not perfect. He must present a bull for his own sin offering. He must present the two goats and the ram. Notice as well that there was the proper clothes.

He had to wear these sacred garments, that symbol that he has now set apart to serve God and to meet with God. And there was also proper washing. He must bathe himself with water. Again, a sign of the need for cleansing and purity when a person comes before God. And so, again, the terms and conditions are saying God is pure and God is holy. God is looking for a representative who is pure, someone who can represent the people before God, and God before the people must be pure. And again, just to cast our minds back to Genesis 22 when we saw God providing a ram for a substitute for Isaac on Mount Moriah, so the high priest brings the ram as an offering, as a reminder that God is providing this whole day.

He's providing the way of access for the priests, and He is providing the sacrifices. Thirdly, God says what to do with the sacrifices. And these details are also important. This is verses 7 to 10.

[7 : 54] We read in verse 8 that there's the casting of lots, a bit like rolling a dice, trusting that God provides and directs. And after the lot is cast, there are these two goats. One goat is to be killed as the sin offering. That goat is taken right into God's presence and is sacrificed privately behind the curtain in the presence of God. But one goat is sent into the wilderness called the scapegoat, and all the people watch publicly as this animal is sent away. Why do those details matter?

Because both those goats, they're like actors in the great drama of atonement. So, we have the sin offering reminding us that the wages of sin is death, reminding us too that God provides a substitute to face the judgment, to pay the price, to take away and to cover sin.

And then there is the scapegoat, which speaks to the effect of God's work of atonement. Sin is removed from the worshiper. The grace and the kindness of God has provided forgiveness so that people can remain in right relationship with God. Here's the fourth of the terms and conditions. God also says what to do with the blood. Old Testament worship was full of blood, and God has a purpose. So, we read many times that the blood is sprinkled. In verse 14, the blood is sprinkled on the atonement cover, sometimes known as the mercy seat. In verse 18, it's sprinkled on the altar where sacrifices are made. So, why the sprinkling?

And there's two reasons, actually, in our text. One reason is this. God says that sin, the people's sin, makes God's house unclean. Verse 19, he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites. So, imagine a home with a nice white carpet. And imagine a visitor coming from working in the garden with big muddy boots and leaving that trail of muddy footprints all over your nicely cleaned white carpet.

Becomes a picture of what's going on in the tabernacle that God says, this tent is like my house, and it is pure, and it is clean, and it is holy. And even as the people come to worship, they come to worship as people who are sinful. And God says, it's as if the stain of sin is now coming into my house, and my house needs to be made clean, not because God is unclean, but because the people are. So, that's one reason why the blood is sprinkled, because sin has made God's house unclean. The second reason is because sin makes people unclean.

[11 : 26] Listen to verse 17, no one is to be in the tent of meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household, and the whole community of Israel. So, if sin is like a dirty stain on clean clothes, if sin is like a virus that contaminates, then every single person in the community has that stain, has that infection. And God says, here's the way to be made clean. And it's by the sprinkling of blood. And that instinctively seems perhaps bizarre and sort of counter to what we would expect, but that blood that is said to make us clean is the symbol that another has died as a substitute, that the moral debt has been paid, that the moral stain has been cleansed, that there is a cure for that moral disease, so that God can continue to live with His people. Here's the fifth term and condition. God says,

He said a lot about what the priests must do. God also says what the people must do. This is in verse 29, where the whole community, whether native-born or foreigner, are to rest, to have a Sabbath rest, to have a Sabbath rest. In other words, to do nothing except worship God. Why?

To teach the people clearly it is God who provides for your atonement, to cover your sin, to give you forgiveness so that peace can be restored. And the worshipers are invited to a faith that rests. As they worship God, they are invited to trust that God has provided, that those sacrifices are effective, that not trusting in my own works, but trusting in God's works is how salvation and forgiveness comes. So, the terms and conditions of the Day of Atonement, they really matter.

To think about them positively, when these terms are kept, God says His people receive forgiveness from their sin. When these terms and conditions are met, there is mercy, even for people who have broken God's law. When these terms and conditions are kept, then God keeps His covenant promise and remains in relationship with Him. This is why we call Leviticus 16 a gospel text, a good news text, because it helps us to see in so many different ways the promise that God makes, even at this stage in the story of the Bible. And in the New Testament, as we have already read, we discover Jesus, our great high priest, the one who came and perfectly fulfilled all God's terms and conditions for atonement perfectly. Perfect high priest, perfect sacrifice. By dying on the cross as our substitute and our sacrifice, we understand that in Jesus, the Lord has provided. The Holy God is pouring out costly love even as His Son's blood is poured out on the cross. That the self-giving love of the Son of God means forgiveness for all who believe. It means we can have the serious joy of life with God. How do you and I receive those benefits? Well, like the Old Testament worshiper, we rest and we trust. We acknowledge that Jesus has done everything for my salvation.

The when He declared on the cross, it is finished. He meant the work of salvation was complete. There was nothing for us to do except to believe in Him, to turn from sin to trust in Jesus.

[16 : 10] Well, having focused on the terms and conditions, let's zoom in for a few minutes on the significance of the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement. But before we even do that, let me just pull back a little bit and give us a bird's-eye view of sacrifice in the storyline of salvation as we find it in the Old Testament part of the Bible. Four key texts. Now, Genesis chapter 3, verse 21, the first time we hear about sacrifice. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden have turned their back on God. They've disobeyed God. Sin has come into the world. They feel covered with shame, and to try and hide their shame, they make a covering of fig leaves. And God says that will never do to cover sin and shame. And so, He sacrifices an animal and clothes them. God graciously provides covering for the shame of sin. Fast forward to the book of Exodus, we find God's people are now slaves in Egypt, and God has announced that in faithfulness to His covenant promise, He is going to bring them out of slavery with great acts of judgment. The last judgment will fall on the people in the land of Egypt, the judgment on the firstborn, but God provides a Passover lamb so that every household that takes a lamb and kills the lamb and sprinkles the blood will know the judgment of God passing over them. God graciously provides for salvation.

Leviticus 16 reminds us what we're reading just now, God provides these animal sacrifices to atone for sin so that God's people can continue to live in fellowship with Him. And then the last text, Isaiah 53, tells us some 700 years before Jesus ever came that God will provide the great sacrifice, who will be the suffering servant. And we learn before the cross that only a man can substitute for a man.

And so, God graciously provides the system of sacrifice because He is committed to covering shame, to dealing with sin, to living with His people, to securing blessing for His people.

Now, let's move from bird's eye to think from the point of view of a worshiper on the ground on the day of atonement. So, imagine ourselves as the people gather around this great tent, watching Aaron, the high priest, as he gathers and brings those animals into the temple as we witness the blood and the sacrifice. What details do we observe? Let's go back to the sin offering for a moment or two.

In verse 9, we read of it in brief, Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. We see violent death. We see that blood is spilled.

[19 : 28] That blood is sprinkled on the furniture of the temple. Some of it before God. Some of it before the people. We see that the whole animal is consumed by fire. There's a very graphic message being given to the worshipers on that day. This is what my sin deserves. This is God's holy judgment because we have broken God's law. God is a holy God, and if I am to live in His presence, I need my sin to be covered and taken away. And we would know that God has provided for me what I could not provide for myself with this sacrifice. Lots of religions, lots of traditional religions, have practiced in the past, and some still practice in the present, animal sacrifice. Human attempts to win the favor of the gods, perhaps to appease the gods. The gods seem to be angry. Let's offer a sacrifice and hope that they do good instead of bad. With that kind of system, the question is always, what can I do to get on good terms with my

God? It's a great picture of sort of a religion that's based on works. But the sacrifices in the Bible are different, entirely different, because they are God's idea and God's good gift. And the message of the sacrifices, this is what God has done. This is what He has provided so that sinners can be on good terms with Him. The sacrifices remind us God must be true to Himself. There must be a way for sin to be dealt with. And so, God provides that way for justice to be done through the sacrifice. But He is also true to Himself in His mercy and His love. And so, He has made a way through the sacrifice for sin to be forgiven and for sinners to be reconciled. As every animal, sacrifice in the Old Testament stands for us as the shadow of that true and better sacrifice, the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, who would lay down

His own life for us to secure eternal redemption. So, that's what you see when you look at the sin offering. What about with the scapegoat? That's a well-known expression, isn't it, in the English language, a scapegoat? Perhaps a company or a government where things go wrong, they choose someone who's going to take the blame. And they have to bear the shame, they probably get the sack, they face exclusion. Somebody is selected. It comes from the Bible. Let's look again at the actions that we have here as Aaron brings the live goat. What happens first? Verse 21, he is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat. There's a great piece of drama happening here that the laying on of these hands is representing a transfer that's taking place. The transfer as sin is loaded onto this goat.

And then there is confession. He confesses over all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites, all their sins, and puts them on the goat's head. So, here's something that is true. The people must own that sin. As the sin and the wickedness is confessed, there must be a heart response. I'm included in that.

I'm trusting that what's happening here represents what I need. And then the goat is walked into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place. So, imagine that as the people gather. They see this goat wandering off beyond the horizon. And they see and they hear the message that my sin has been taken away and dealt with by God.

[23 : 48] It's an acted message that by God's mercy, our sin has been transferred, our guilt has been taken, and it has been removed. Atonement has been made. A remarkable day in the life of God's people, year upon year upon year. An amazing ceremony. I don't know how many of you were in Edinburgh when the festival was on this year, but I was taken by the strapline for the Edinburgh International Festival. The strapline was rituals that unite us. And we probably understand that rituals and shared practices have that kind of power to create and to sustain community. And that was absolutely true for the Old Testament worshipers. As they shared the Day of Atonement together, this ritual helped them to see and to enter into the good news of the gospel, that God is holy and the people are sinful. And that God is just and God is loving, and that faith brings forgiveness and a restored relationship. And you know, that's the goal of the rituals that unite us in the church today also.

Whenever we gather for worship Sunday by Sunday, whenever we gather for the Lord's Supper, we are uniting around Christ's work on the cross. We are sharing together, entering in, celebrating the good news of forgiveness and new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus. So, as we come to a close, let's think thirdly about how Jesus fulfills what the Day of Atonement promises. Back to that opening observation question from the former slave as he arrived in the UK, why is there no animal sacrifice in church? Why, as modern Western people, are we not used to seeing animals be sacrificed?

Well, the answer lies in the message of Isaiah 53, in the message of the cross. In the end, we discover that sin is so serious that no animal sacrifice can be a suitable substitute for sinful humanity.

That God is so holy that only a perfect, sinless sacrifice can pay the price, and God is so good that he has provided his Son to be that sacrifice, to be the great high priest. As our high priest, Jesus is perfect and sinless. He has no need to sacrifice for his own sin.

He is clothed in perfect righteousness, not just for a while, but for all time, always obedient. He is the one who came according to God's salvation timetable. And remember who Jesus is. He is the eternal Son of God who became a man in history. And only Jesus, the God-man, can secure atonement for us. Only he can fully pay the price for our sin. Only he can give us eternal salvation. And Jesus came to go to the cross. And at the cross, the penalty fell on him. He offered himself as a sacrifice. His blood was shed as our sin offering. He bore sin and its judgment as our scapegoat, so our sin can be removed from us. We don't have an altar in a church because the cross is Jesus' altar, the place of sacrifice where he is offered to God for our forgiveness. The cross becomes for us our mercy seat. As we understand that standing between the holy God and us as lawbreakers is the perfect one. Jesus. That his blood is shed to cover our sin. He stands in our place so the just anger of God falls on him and not on us. Like the day of atonement, the cross was a place of violence and death and bloodshed.

[28 : 40] But we must not turn away because in his sacrifice there is that washing from the guilt and the stain of sin. There is the promise of sin. There is the promise of peace with God and restored relationship.

There is the news that judgment has been taken and eternal life is given. And that's the message of our worship. And it's the message of the Lord's table. And to hear it and to see it is to enter into that serious joy, that deep unbreakable joy that belongs to those who know that Christ has died for me and my sin is forgiven. Now, we're going to pray.

And once we've prayed, our junior church classes will return and we'll move to the Lord's table. So, let's pray. Our God and Father, while sometimes the Old Testament system of worship and sacrifice can seem so strange and foreign and different to us. And we thank you that by your design, the details point us to the coming of your Son, the Lord Jesus, to what he would do for us on the cross as our great high priest and our great and perfect sacrifice. Now, we thank you that his is the blood that covers sin, that his is the sacrifice that removes sin and guilt, that by his wounds we are healed and we are reconciled so we can live before you, that we can come into your presence as our Father, knowing that you are a God of grace, that you have shown your love to us in the Lord Jesus. May everyone here see and believe the good news of the Day of Atonement.