

The Day of Atonement

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[0 : 00] If you'd like to open your Bibles to the second reading, page 91, Leviticus chapter 16, page 91, and you should have received in the newsletter a sermon outline that will help you to follow along.

Let me pray for us that God will help us to understand his word together now. Heavenly Father, we thank you Lord for your word that we've heard read. We pray as we think about it more now that you would work in our hearts and minds that we would understand more about Jesus and what he has done for us.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to look at the Day of Atonement together this morning and it's the biggest festival in the Jewish calendar.

If Jewish people only go to synagogue one day in the year, this will be the day that they go. So, when I grew up, the synagogue that I was going to was packed every Day of Atonement.

Thousands of people who would come. It's just my guess, but I think for most Jewish people, they do feel some sense of guilt and would go on the Day of Atonement partly out of that sense of guilt.

[1 : 15] In some respects, I suppose, to think that you've done your bit. You've put in an appearance at least once a year and hopefully she'll be right, mate. So, it's a bit like any Aussie, really, I guess.

I'm sure many Aussies hope that if God is real and he's there, that if they do their bit, put in an appearance occasionally, do a few good things that hopefully she'll be right. I don't know if you remember the movie Crocodile Dundee with Paul Hogan many years ago now.

In the movie, when Crocodile Dundee was asked about God, he said, I mean, God, we're mates. It's sort of like we Aussies are so laid back that our God is too and we're just a couple of mates.

It reminds me of an ad that used to be on TV in Sydney, a sort of daggy Christian ad that had this little tune, sort of, when you get to heaven, what do you think you'll say?

And the answer was, I think I'll say, g'day. So, sort of saying, we Aussies are okay with God, we'll just rock up before him and say g'day because God's me mate.

[2 : 21] It's a sort of comforting thought that God would be an Aussie like us and very laid back and she'll be right. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, depending on how you think of it, but unfortunately, when you read about people seeing God in the Bible, it's very, very different.

Normally, they fall down before him as if dead. That's very different to sort of cheekily rocking up before him and saying g'day. Why is it that people in the Bible, when they see God fall down before him as if dead?

Well, this is where the book of Leviticus helps. The book of Leviticus teaches us that God is holy, perfect in holiness, never makes mistakes, never does wrong.

He is perfectly holy, unlike us. We make plenty of mistakes, we are sinful, we do all sorts of things wrong, we don't live the way God wants us to. We are unholy. And the problem then is how can a holy God be in relationship with his unholy people?

And that's the problem that the Day of Atonement is going to address, how a holy God can be dwelling with his unholy people. Moses, you might remember, was told by God that no one could see God's face and live.

[3 : 39] And the reason why is that the penalty for sin is death. If we appear before God as we are in our sin, we bear our guilt and die. We can't just rock up before God and say g'day as we are.

There was a graphic reminder of this in Leviticus before the passage we'll look at in chapter 10 in Leviticus. It talks about Aaron and his four sons. They were the first priests of Israel.

And two of his four sons did, as it were, rock up before God and say g'day. And they were immediately struck down dead. Even though they were priests of God, they were still unholy, still sinful and could not come into God's presence.

And they did. And they died. Now, because of this, God actually set up this special system called the tabernacle, later the temple, where there's literally a screen cutting us off from God so that we don't see him and die.

In the temple, there is a room called the most holy place. There is the Ark of the Covenant, which partly symbolizes God's throne. And there, the God of the universe dwells above the Ark.

[4 : 49] And there's a screen or curtain or covering before the Ark and God so that you literally can't see God lest you die. And it's a graphic reminder that we are unholy.

We are sinful. We can't just rock up into God's presence and say g'day or we would die. Have a look at Leviticus 16 that was read for us before.

It talks about, goes back to chapter 10, talks about what happened to Aaron's two sons. Verse 1. The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron when they drew near before the Lord and died.

The Lord said to Moses, tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the Ark, or he will die.

For I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. This is saying even if you are the high priest of Israel, you can't just come before God whenever you like and, as it were, rock up before him and say g'day or even you would die.

[5 : 52] And Leviticus 16 will go on to say that there's only one person who can come into God's presence, which is in fact the high priest, but only once a year on the day of atonement.

And when he does come into God's presence, there's a special way he has to do it. Have a look down at verse 12. Verse 12.

Point number two then, I want to look at what Leviticus 16 says about the day of atonement to see what's it for?

What does it achieve? Why is it there? What is the day of atonement for? Now, I think if I ask most Christians what's the day of atonement for, the answer would probably be, well, as the name suggests, it's to atone for your sins.

So your sins will be forgiven. But I actually think that's not the right answer. That's sort of partly right. But in fact, the daily burnt offering is where your sins were forgiven.

[7 : 53] So every day, twice a day, morning and evening, there was a burnt offering at the temple. And that was what gave forgiveness for sins. It wasn't like God just forgave their sins once a year.

But every day he forgave the Israelites their sins. The day of atonement, I guess, like most things with the Bible, is something that we often read ourselves into. And here it's not so much about us, but it's more about God.

It's not so much about our sins being forgiven, which happened every day. It's more about God and how a holy God can stay dwelling in the temple with his unholy people.

In a nutshell, the day of atonement basically is a spring cleaning ceremony. Once a year, the temple was cleaned out of sin.

It's a spring cleaning ceremony. So again, the great thing about the temple is that the nation of Israel is like no other nation. They have dwelling with them in the temple, the God of the universe.

[8 : 54] But God cannot dwell with unholiness. And all year long, the Israelites have come in and out of the temple, bringing in their unholiness with them. And it's a bit like if you picture it, it will be like kids with muddy feet coming in and out of the house.

And after a while, the house will be filthy and will need to be cleaned. And here's the spiritual equivalent where the Israelites have brought their unholiness into the temple all year long.

And once a year, it's going to be cleaned out from their unholiness. And so once a year, there's a spring cleaning ceremony where their sin is cleaned out of the temple.

And the reason why is so that a holy God can stay dwelling with his unholy people. So that's what the Day of Atonement is for. A spring cleaning so that a holy God can stay dwelling with his unholy people.

Now, the dilemma might be, what do you clean unholiness with? Obviously, you clean dirt with water, but you can't see unholiness. What do you clean it with?

[10 : 00] I think if I ask most Aussies, what do you clean sin or unholiness with? I think they'd say with good deeds. They have a picture, I think, a lot of people of God weighing our deeds in a scale, balance of scales.

And you'd hope that your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds. And so what do you clean bad deeds or sin or unholiness with? Some good deeds to sort of tip the balance. Well, that's certainly not the Bible's answer.

What does the Bible say you clean sin or unholiness with? Well, the Bible's answer is that you clean it with blood. Blood cleans unholiness as water cleans dirt.

Have a look at the next page in your Bible, Leviticus chapter 17. Towards the bottom of the page, Leviticus 17, verse 11. It says, Blood atones for sins, God says.

And the reason why is it's symbolic sort of picture language. You can't see unholiness like you can see dirt. Blood symbolizes that death has taken place. The penalty for sin is death.

[11 : 23] And so you clean sin with a substitute death, with blood, which symbolizes death. So blood cleans sin as water cleans dirt.

So we're going to look at two pictures of the day of atonement ceremonies in Leviticus 16. Here is the first picture, spring cleaning the tabernacle with blood.

Have a look back to the previous page, Leviticus 16, verse 11 again, but this time in chapter 16. Here it says that Aaron, the high priest, shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house.

He shall slaughter the bull as a sin offering for himself. So Aaron, as the high priest, he also is sinful. He is unholy and he has to atone for his sins before he can atone for the sins of the people.

The next couple of verses we read, verses 12 and 13, where he goes in to the most holy place with a cloud of incense smoke. And then at the end of that paragraph, verse 14, says what he does with this bull's blood for himself.

[12 : 31] Verse 14, he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat. And before the mercy seat, he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times.

So Aaron goes into the most holy place with a cloud of incense smoke so that he doesn't see God and die. And he takes this blood from the sacrifice with him and sprinkles it all over the most holy place.

And what he's doing is he's cleaning out his unholiness from God's presence in the most holy place. And having done that for himself, he then does it for the people.

Verse 15, he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering that is for the people. And bring its blood inside the curtain and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat.

Thus, he shall make atonement for the sanctuary because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. So you see, having cleaned out the most holy place with blood for his sin, he then cleans it out with blood for the sins of the people.

[13 : 40] And then he comes out from behind the curtain back into the main part of the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, where it's called the holy place, not the most holy place.

And he does the same thing there. So second half of verse 16, where we stopped, it says, and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleannesses.

So having cleaned all of the tabernacle there with blood, he then comes out to the front of it where there's the altar on which the sacrifices were made. And he cleans that with blood.

Verse 18. Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the Lord and make atonement on its behalf and shall take some of the blood of the bull, which was for his sins and of the blood of the goat, which was for the people's sins and put it on each of the horns of the altar.

He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times and cleanse it and hallow it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel. So there you go.

[14 : 43] Everything is now new and shiny and clean. Well, not quite, actually. It's all covered with blood, which is a graphic reminder that the penalty for sin is death.

A holy God cannot stay dwelling with his unholy people. But here once a year, the whole tabernacle and everything in it is cleaned out with blood to clean away the people's unholiness.

Did you notice there before we go on, by the way, did you notice who atonement is made for or rather what atonement is made for? In verse 18 that we read, atonement is made for the altar.

And look down at verse 20. It says when he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar. Here atonement is made for inanimate objects, for things, the things of the temple, because atonement here is not so much about forgiveness of people's sins.

That did happen on the day of atonement, but it happened that day as it did every other day with a burnt offering that's talked about later in the passage. Here it's not about forgiveness of sins.

[15 : 52] It's about cleaning out the things of the temple with blood. Again, so that a holy God can stay dwelling with his unholy people. So that's picture number one, spring cleaning the tabernacle with blood.

The second picture, we'll do much more briefly, is about sending their sin far away from the newly cleansed temple. Look at verse 20. When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat.

Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat.

And sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

So here's another graphic picture. All these things are picture language, symbolism. And by that, I don't mean it's real. It's symbolizing real stuff, but in picture language rather than words as such.

[17 : 05] And the picture is clear, I think, that now that the temple has been cleaned out of their sin, their sins are put on the head of the live goat. And the goat carries their sin far away from the temple, away from God's presence.

So as far as the east is from the west, so far are their sins removed away from God. Again, so that a holy God can stay dwelling with his unholy people.

So that's Leviticus 16, the day of atonement ceremonies. A once a year spring cleaning of the temple from their sin and then their sin being sent far away from God's presence.

So there are three things, I think, at least that these day of atonement pictures teach us. The first thing is that God is holy. God is perfect in holiness and cannot be approached by anyone.

Secondly, it teaches that we are unholy. We cannot just, like Crocodile Dundee, rock up before God because we're his mate. If anyone approached God, they died in their sin.

[18 : 12] So God is holy, we are unholy. And thirdly, this shows that our sin or unholiness must be dealt with for a holy God to stay dwelling with his unholy people.

Our sin or unholiness must be dealt with for a holy God to stay dwelling with his unholy people. Now, in Leviticus 16, these things are shown to us in picture language, symbols.

But they're picturing something that's real. God really is holy. Our sin really does need to be dealt with. But it is picture language. It's symbolism. It's the shadow.

It doesn't actually work in one sense. That's not the real thing. It's a bit like the blueprint for a building. It's a real blueprint which symbolizes a real building.

But it's not actually the building itself. It should make sense. The Day of Atonement doesn't deal with our sins once for all because it's repeated year after year.

[19 : 10] If it actually worked, you'd just do it once and that's it. You'd be forgiven. But it has to keep being repeated. And it's not like the blood of animals can actually atone for the sins of humans.

But what the Day of Atonement is doing is it's pointing ahead of itself, showing that God is holy. We are unholy. Our sin must be dealt with. And it's pointing ahead to the time when God would deal with our sins once and for all.

And of course, that came on the Day of Atonement when Jesus died on the cross. And there our sin was dealt with once and for all.

And so the Day of Atonement looks ahead to this day when Jesus dealt with our sins. We're going to move now to the book of Hebrews if you want to open up there to our first reading.

So first of all, page 975, Hebrews chapter 9, page 975, Hebrews shows the reality that the Day of Atonement looked forward to.

[20 : 13] And first of all, it says that Jesus is our great high priest. He's like Aaron and all the high priests after him in that he is the mediator between us and God. He alone approaches God to make atonement for us.

But look at what it says in Hebrews chapter 9, verse 11. Hebrews 9, verse 11. It says, But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent or tabernacle, not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, he entered once for all into the holy place.

Jesus is our high priest, that's saying, who makes atonement for our sins, not in the man-made temple, which God told Moses was just a copy of the real one. He enters into the real tabernacle of heaven itself to atone for our sins as our great high priest.

And secondly, he doesn't take with himself the blood of animals, which can't atone for sins, but he takes the real sacrifice for sin, which is his own blood. Have a look again at verse 12.

It says, He entered once for all into the holy place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

[21 : 33] So Jesus himself, in his death on the cross, is the sacrifice that atones for our sins, once and for all. And have a look over the page, further on in chapter 9, where it talks about Jesus' death in terms of the Day of Atonement ceremonies.

Chapter 9, verse 25. It says, Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the holy place year after year, with blood that is not his own.

For then he would have had to suffer again and again, since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age, to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Jesus' death is the Day of Atonement, where our sin is dealt with once and for all. It's the fulfilment of Leviticus 16. Now I could stop there in one sense, but I want to keep going and talk about how the ceremonies of the Day of Atonement are fulfilled in Jesus' death.

So again, if you think about Leviticus 16, it's showing us how a holy God can stay dwelling with his unholy people. And that's what's being fulfilled in the book of Hebrews.

[22 : 50] Jesus' death means that we now have full access to God. Now that our sins have been forgiven, now that our unholiness has been dealt with by Jesus' death on the cross, we can now come behind the curtain into God's presence and we won't die.

We're no longer barred from his presence by a curtain standing in front of him. You might know in the Gospels when Jesus died on the cross that it says the curtain was torn in two. So that way that barred us from his presence is now open.

For all who trust in Jesus, we can now come into God's presence behind the curtain and we won't die in our sins. And it's no longer just a high priest once a year who can go behind the curtain with a cloud of incense smoke.

But now anyone who trusts in Jesus, Jew or Gentile, can come into the very presence of God because of Jesus' death on the cross. Our sin has been dealt with. Our unholiness has been washed away once and for all.

And we now have full access to God. Have a look again in Hebrews, how this is explained in chapter 10, chapter 10, verse 19.

[24 : 03] Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh.

And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith. This is saying we now have confidence to go behind the curtain without the smoke screen or veil into the very presence of God because Jesus' death has dealt with our sin.

If you take this for granted, you're missing a huge point that the Old and New Testaments are making. The Old Testament is showing that we can't just rock up before God as we are.

Anyone who did that died in their sin. But this is showing now that Jesus has dealt with our sin in his death on the cross, now we can just go before God.

Now we are in relationship with God. We are his mates, if you like. And we can come before him anytime. And that is the most incredible thing ever, which the Old Testament prophets longed for and looked ahead to, which we now have, full, free access to God.

[25 : 20] I'm going to skip the next little point and go to the last one now to draw out one final implication then of this free access to God, which is prayer.

So last passage, if you flick back with me, a couple of pages in Hebrews to Hebrews chapter 4, page 973, Hebrews chapter 4, top of the page, Hebrews 4, verse 14.

Since then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the son of God. Let us hold fast to our confession, for we don't have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

This is saying we can now approach the throne of God's grace with boldness, with confidence, and receive what we need through prayer. Prayer is an immense privilege and I think that lots of people, particularly perhaps non-Christians, just would take it for granted that they could just come before God whenever they like and pray to Him and that if He's there, He'll probably hear and answer their prayers, which I think in the Bible is not the case at all.

[26 : 47] How could a holy God have an unholy person approach Him in prayer? I think God does not necessarily hear and answer people's prayers, though He could.

But now for us, with our sins forgiven, our unholiness dealt with, the curtain removed, now we can come into God's presence any time in prayer.

And now because of the death of Jesus, God can and does hear our prayers. That is an amazing thing. Now I think as a minister, often people will want to ask, what's a knack to prayer, a trick, something you can tell me that will help my prayer life.

And I think the most amazing thing about prayer, the trick, if you like, to prayer, is again not something to do with us, but to do with God, to do with Jesus and His death on the cross. And it's that you can actually come before God and pray now because of Jesus' death on the cross.

Any time now, you and I, in relationship with God, with full access to God, can come before Him in prayer, approaching the throne of grace with boldness and receive what we need in time of need.

[27 : 59] That is an immense privilege. Are you taking that privilege for granted? I think I often do.

But what a great privilege it is that we can come before God in prayer. Well, when you get to heaven, what do you think you'll say? I don't think it'll be good day.

In the Old Testament, no one could even approach God or they would die. For God is holy and we are not. But the Old Testament day of atonement ceremonies allowed a holy God to remain dwelling with His unholy people and appointed ahead of itself to the day of atonement when Jesus died on the cross.

And that is now given those who trust in Jesus full free access to God where we can come before Him and pray to Him anytime and He hears our prayers.

And that is an immense privilege which we don't want to take for granted. But instead, we want to thank God that He is indeed our mate and that because of the death of Jesus, we can come before Him anytime with full access in prayer.

[29 : 11] let's do that right now. We thank you, Heavenly Father, for your great mercy that in Jesus' death on the cross our sin has been atoned for and that you have forgiven us.

We pray for any who are here this morning who have not yet trusted in Jesus that you might convict them of their sin and that they would trust in Him and receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

We thank you, Lord, for the great privilege that the curtain has been removed and that we can now come into your presence and that you will hear our prayers. We thank you for the great gift of prayer and for your great mercy to us in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.