

The Atonement - What does it mean?

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Date: 27 March 2016

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[0 : 00] And we read some verses, first of all, from Leviticus chapter 16. And we've been there at 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, Please tell Aaron, your brother, not to come at all times into the holy place within the veil, before the mercy seat which is upon the ark, lest he die.

For I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. But thus shall Aaron come into the holy place, with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

He shall put on the holy linen coat, and shall have the linen breeches on his body, be girded with the linen girdle, and wear the linen turban.

These are the holy garments. He shall bathe his body in water, and then put them on. And he shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering.

[1 : 23] And Aaron shall offer the burnt offering as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. Then he shall take the two goats, and set them before the Lord at the door of the tent of meeting.

And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats, one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for Azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat in which the lot fell for the Lord, and offer it as a sin offering.

But the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that they may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

Then turning over to chapter 23, begins at verse 26. This is also about the Day of Atonement.

Chapter 23 is what might be termed the liturgical year of the old people of Israel, because it describes all the varying feasts are to be kept.

So beginning there at verse 26, the Lord said to Moses, On the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement.

[2 : 42] It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present an offering by fire to the Lord. And you shall do no work on this day, for it is a day of atonement to make atonement for you before the Lord your God.

For whoever is not afflicted on this same day shall be cut off from his people, and whoever does any work on this day, that person I will destroy from among his people.

You shall do no work. It is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. It shall be to you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves.

On the ninth day of the month, beginning at evening, from evening to evening, you shall keep your Sabbath. Then turning over to the New Testament and reading there in Hebrews chapter 9, beginning at verse 11 to verse 14.

verse 14. When Christ appeared as the high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, he entered once for all into the holy place, taking not the blood of goats and calves, but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

[4 : 29] For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of an heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Amen. May the Lord bless to us that reading. May it be to his praise and to his glory. What a wonderful word that is. And I'm thinking, first of all, about the English word, atonement.

It's known a long time ago in the English of Chaucer. But more recently, it came into our language in 1513 in the writings and the speeches of the then Chancellor of England, Sir Thomas More. And he derived it from a Latin verb which practically means to be at one. But into our church vocabulary, it came in 1526 with the translator William Tyndale.

And he used it many, many times in his translations. You'll also find it, if you're interested, in the works of the playwright William Shakespeare.

[6 : 03] You'll find it in the play of Henry IV, Part II, or in King Richard III. But we come to think about this in the Old Testament because the Old Testament is the foundation for our thinking in all about this.

And I want to say three things about this. The first of which is the description of the ceremony in Leviticus 16. There's the enactment of the ceremony in that passage from Leviticus 23.

And there's the fulfillment in the passage on Hebrews 9, verses 11 to 14. Now, the Day of Atonement is referred to three times in Genesis, Deuteronomy.

In the passage that we read from Leviticus 16, and also in there in the liturgical year passage in 23. You'll also find it in the book of Numbers in chapter 29, verses 7 to 11.

Now, this passage in Leviticus 16 has a background because it starts off by saying, the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron when they drew near before the Lord and died.

[7 : 31] Now, that incident is actually recorded in Leviticus chapter 10 and the first two verses. And there we read that now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unholy fire before the Lord such as he had not commanded them.

And fire came from the presence of the Lord and devoured them and they died before the Lord. So, this legislation that's coming in Leviticus chapter 16 is to prevent any more death among the priesthood.

And so, we find, first of all, there's a description of all of this. You find it in that verse in chapter 23. The Lord said to Moses, on the tenth day of the seventh month is the day of atonement and so on.

Now, when we look at the chapter 16, it's actually quite long and involved and it's quite complex. So, you can analyse it like this.

The first two verses deal with an introduction. Verses three to five deal with animals to be slaughtered and priestly dress needed.

[8 : 56] Then, in six to ten, you have an outline. That's the passage we read of what's going on. From verses 11 to 28, you get a detailed description like this.

Verses 11 to 19, you have the blood slinking the rites. 20 to 22, deal with the scapegoat called Azazel. 23 to 28, the cleansing of the participants.

And finally, in 29 to 34, the people's duty. So, we're very grateful for this outline in verses six to ten because it fills out, the detail of it is filled out in verses 11 to 28.

And elsewhere in the writings of Moses, you can find the same pattern that he gives you something in outline and then fills it out. Now, what does the outline tell us?

Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. Then he shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the door of the tent of meeting.

[10 : 14] That's not inside the Holy of Holies, but at the door. And Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel.

And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord and offer it as a sin offering. But the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the Lord to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

So, first of all, Aaron has to deal with his own problems, his own sins, and he has to make atonement for him and for all who are in his house.

And then this outline goes on and talks about the atonement for the nation of Israel, which is effected by the provision of two goats. The first of which is to be slain as a sin offering and the second presented alive before the Lord.

Now, in thinking about all of this detail, I want to concentrate very briefly on these two goats. They're there in the process of making atonement for the nation of Israel.

[11 : 40] Now, in this law, the first goat occupies some five verses. And in these five verses, we are told that he is to, first of all, kill the goat, which has been provided for a sin offering for the people of Israel and for the holy place and for the tent of meeting.

Listen to verse 15 in brevity. Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering, which is for the people, and bring its blood within the veil, sprinkling it upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat. In doing this, Aaron is told very clearly, no one else is to be there. Only he is to go in there. There shall be no man in the tent of meeting when he enters to make atonement until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and so on. But he's told to do something else. And that something else is the provision of incense. We're told this, he shall bring it within the veil and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat which is upon the testimony, lest he die.

[13:06] Now, if you go back to the book of Exodus, chapter 33, you have Moses praying to God, show me your glory. And the Lord says to him, no man can see me and live.

And so this action of creating this cloud of incense is so done that the high priest may not see the person of God.

He's concealed in this cloud. Now, what about this other goat? It's said to be for Azazel and over which Aaron, as high priest, is to confess over it the iniquities of the sons of Israel.

The text tells us, verse 21, Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send him away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. the goat is given a name.

[14:22] It's to be for Azazel. Now, in that phrase, Azazel, that name, there are, in fact, two Hebrew words.

The first of which is the verb Azal, which means to remove or to drive away. and the second is the word El, which is the name of God.

So, the whole meaning of that phrase means that which God removes or drives away. And so, this lesson is being taught to the people of Israel, only God can take away sin.

yes, there's a liturgy. There's a process. It's accomplished by means of these two goats, the first of which was killed as a sin offering and the second of which was preserved alive.

The second one that was preserved alive, the problem is that when you confess the sins over this goat and you lead it away into the wilderness, how do you know it's not going to wander back?

[15:40] Ah, well, more recent Jewish tradition has it that what happened was that it was taken to a ravine and shoved over the edge so that it couldn't come back.

Now, there's a process here in all of this liturgy and it's the processes of death and resurrection. The sin offering died the goat which effected the atonement lived until it was shoved down the ravine.

So, that's what's happening in this ceremony. There's a real wealth of truth in this that we have to appreciate. But let's go on now until the enactment of this ceremony.

Numbers 29, 7 to 8, we read this. On the tenth day of the seventh month you shall have a holy convocation and afflict yourselves.

You shall do no work but you shall offer a burnt offering to the Lord, a pleasing odour. One young bull, one ram, seven male lambs, a year old, and they shall be to you without blemish.

[16:58] There is what is I described earlier on in verses 29 to 34 of Leviticus chapter 16 what may be termed as the people's duty.

And the people's duty is spelled out in the very first verse in verse 29. On the tenth day of the month you shall afflict yourselves.

Also in Leviticus 23, the tenth day of the seventh month is a day of atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation and you shall afflict yourselves.

What does the law mean by that statement? You shall afflict yourselves. There's a psalm, Psalm 35, where David is saying this, I wore sackcloth, I afflicted myself with fasting, I prayed with my head on my bosom.

When you read that psalm in verse 11, you find this, malicious witnesses rise up. They ask me of things that I do not know.

[18:23] They requite me or reward me evil for good. My soul is forlorn. But I, when they were sick, what did I do?

I wore sackcloth. I prayed for them. He prayed for his enemies. This is he enters into a time of prayer and repentance on their behalf.

What about this? There's another occasion in which David exercised this rite of self-affliction. And this is in the matter of when he slept with the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and this resulted in her becoming pregnant with his child.

In all the estimations that you get in the Old Testament of David the king, you get the description that he walked after the Lord with all his heart except in the matter father of Uriah the Hittite.

And Nathan the prophet is given a parable. And this is the parable of the rich man and the poor man. The rich man had many, many flocks and many, many herds.

[19 : 57] But the poor man only had one, a new lamb. And to the rich man there came a visitor. and he didn't want to slay any of his flock.

So he took the ewe lamb belonging to the poor man. And when David listens to this, he gets angry and says, the man who has done this thing deserves to die.

And Nathan says, you are the man. This is what is called conviction of sin.

Almost a phrase disappeared. David, we were told, therefore, besought God for the child, and David fasted and went in and lay all night upon the ground.

So here he prays for the illegitimate child that it will live. But it didn't. In Psalm 51, we get more affliction.

[21 : 02] he says this, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only have I sinned and done that which is evil in your sight.

He's acting out of a sense of conviction of sin. and what he has in mind in this Psalm and what's at stake for him is his relationship with God.

He prays, take not your Holy Spirit from me. But the word of forgiveness had already been given through Nathan the prophet.

The Lord also has put away your sin, you shall not die. So, through this prayer of remorse and this affliction of his soul, such as recommended in the book of Leviticus, we find that the Lord granted David forgiveness and pardon for his sin.

What can we make of that? We are not waiting and not living in Old Testament times. We are not waiting for the day of atonement.

[22 : 30] The day of atonement for the Jewish people this year will take place on October the 12th. But for us it's already happened when Jesus died on our behalf on Golgotha's hill.

So, what are we required to do when we think of the death of Jesus on the cross, the cry of dereliction, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

What are we to do? If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

It speaks to us of the daily need of confessing our sins before God. God. But there's something else. On those occasions that we celebrate the Lord's Supper, the Apostle writes this, whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.

But let a person examine themselves. And so let them eat of the bread and drink of the cup. The affliction of the soul, yes, it's there in the Old Testament, but it's also there in the New Testament.

[24 : 03] And the idea of this rite of affliction and fasting is that we may glorify the Savior who died for us. Thirdly, the fulfillment.

Hebrews 9 verses 11 and 12. When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, he entered in once for all into the holy place, taking not the blood of goats and calves, but his own blood, God, thus securing an eternal redemption.

So we've moved from the Mosaic situation, way back there in Leviticus 16, we've moved from its application to the afflicting of the soul, such as in the life of David.

Now, we're talking of something different, and something greater, and we're required to understand these words.

And if you look at Hebrews chapter 9, you find that in the first five verses, he outlines the contents of the tabernacle in the wilderness. Then in verses 6 to 10, he has been outlining the worship practices of the high priests, and more particularly, of the high priests of olden times, and so he makes this point.

[25 : 44] According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifice which cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper are offered, but deal only with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

So when we look at Hebrews chapter 9, we find that it is in fact a commentary on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus chapter 16.

When you turn to Hebrews chapter 10 of the very same epistle, you find that it's a commentary upon the laws of the daily offerings that were described in Leviticus 1 to 7.

Now going into Leviticus chapter 16, you find that there were three basic movements of the high priest. First of all, he had to appear in the presence of the people for whom he was going to make this atonement.

So we find Leviticus 16, 5, he shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering and one for a burnt offering.

[27 : 02] His next movement is to appear in the Holy of Holies. He shall take a censor, this is verses 12 and 13, full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small.

And he shall bring it within the veil and put the incense on the fire before the Lord that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat which is upon the testimony lest he die.

Then, when all of this had been done successfully, he had to return to the same people he had originally appeared to. Verse 23, then Aaron shall come into the tent of meeting and shall put off the linen garments which he put on when he went into the holy place and shall leave them there.

So there are three distinct movements of the high priest. And these three distinct movements have been replicated in the life of our Lord.

The epistle to the Hebrews is very clear about this. Verses 25 and 26 of chapter 9. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly as the high priest enters the holy place yearly with blood his own.

[28 : 23] For then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

He's already appeared. Then we find, secondly, that he appears in the very presence of God, in the holiest place.

Verse 24. For Christ has entered not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself.

Now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. The final movement is yet to happen.

It is to reappear to the people he had made atonement for, and we read this in verses 27 and 28.

Just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been once offered to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for them.

[29 : 56] We are not expecting a yearly day of atonement. It's already happened. And if this is a wonderful truth, which I believe it to be, what are the practical applications of it all?

Hebrews 10 verses 22 to 24 says this, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good work.

So there are three points to this. Let us draw near to God. How are we to do that? The tenth chapter goes on and says, do not neglect the assembling of yourselves, the meeting of yourselves together, as the habit of some is.

Now Hebrews has been written to Christians who were under persecution, some of whom apparently were prepared to go back into Judaism.

[31 : 29] And so some were guilty of not assembling with the people of God. Why should you assemble?

Why should you draw near to God? The reformer John Calvin said that the marks of the true church? Where is the church that preaches the word of God and where the sacraments are faithfully administered?

So if we draw near to God by coming to his house, we are refreshed and encouraged in the ministry of the word.

We have means of grace in the sacraments when they are administered and we have the encouragement of God's people.

Let us draw near. Let us hold fast our Christian confession. And here he's saying that this is something that you have to do.

[32 : 35] You have to stand on the beliefs that you have. If you believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only way to God, then let us hold fast that Christian confession.

The third point, let us consider how to encourage one another in the faith. If we can't find encouragement in God's house, where in heaven's name are we going to find it?

We find it here, in the presence of the living God. This, then, is the teaching of the atonement as we find it in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New.

May the Lord bless these remarks, may they be to his praise and to his glory. We'll sing further, and finally, in William Cowper's great hymn, All for a closer walk with God.