

Atoning Sacrifice

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[0 : 00] My friends, while you remain standing, I'll pray. Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have said that your word is living and active, sharper than any sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and you've made it able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Please enable us, please enable me to speak your word faithfully. Please cause it to do what you have promised it will. And we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ and for his glory.

Amen. Well, please stand, friends. Well, we had planned it a year ago and we booked it nine months ago.

We paid a deposit and we're preparing to go next year in May. Together, Heather and I were going to return to Papua New Guinea where we had grown up. We're going to walk on two tracks and then we're going to take a 70 kilometre canoe ride.

In total, we would be travelling across Papua New Guinea from top to bottom. It was called the Coast to Coast Walk, understandably, and it involved walking on two great tracks.

[1 : 07] One was called the Bulldog Track. The other was called the Black Cat Trail. Now, I wonder if some bells are beginning to ring for some of you now. Yes, that's correct.

It was the Black Cat Trail, which was under the guidance at our time of the trekking company we were going with, where two porters were hacked to death and four trekkers injured this year.

Two weeks ago, our trek was finally cancelled. The trail is now inaccessible. And so we are on the hunt for a new adventure. Perhaps we could try some other inaccessible places in the world.

And here are the top ten inaccessible places in the world. Number ten, Easter Island. Number nine, Alert in Canada, believed to be the northernmost inhabited place on Earth.

Number eight, Tristan da Cunha, a volcanic group of islands in the most remoted inhabited archipelago on Earth. Number seven, McMurdo Station, located in the southern tip of Ross Island in the Antarctic.

[2 : 12] Number six, I don't like cold. Number six, Angel Falls, the world's highest uninterrupted waterfall, which falls a staggering 979 metres.

Number five, Bouvet Island in the South Atlantic Ocean. Number four, Point Nemo. This is a place in the ocean farthest from land and is located somewhere in the South Pacific Ocean.

It's just water, of course. Number three, Tutona Mine in South Africa, which is 3.8 kilometres deep. Number two, Nika Crystal Cave in Mexico, where temperatures reach 58 degrees centigrade and the humidity is 90 to 90 percent.

And apparently if you go there, you last 10 minutes unprotected. Number one, Mount Everest. But if you lived among the people in Israel in the wilderness, then let me tell you, the most inaccessible place in the world travelled with them.

It was a place called the most holy place. It represented the very presence of God himself. And because of human sin, only one person could enter it only once a year.

[3 : 26] And what is more astounding is that it represented a heavenly reality. And into that heavenly reality, no one could enter. Moses might get close up on Mount Sinai, but not even he could go there.

Friends, today marks the second in our Bible talks on the doctrine of the atonement. And it's all about how the inaccessible presence of God becomes open and accessible.

However, to understand what happens and how it happens, we need to take a look at the book of Leviticus and the rather strange passage we had read from Leviticus chapter 16.

So I want you to open your Bibles with me. I'm going to explain Leviticus 16 and then we're going to have a look at the rest of scripture. Now, the context for this passage, you need to understand, is set by the opening chapters of the book of Genesis.

Those chapters set a marvellous picture where God is at work as creator. He crafts this wonderful garden. He fills it with delight.

[4 : 27] He creates human beings to live in it. And the most delightful and enchanting thing is that he is there with them. He is, they are in his presence.

He is accessible. They serve him. And then tragedy occurs because human sin erupts. God executes judgment. He can't dwell in the midst of sin. He cannot dwell amongst those who commit sin.

And so sinful human beings are rejected from the garden because of sin. Cherubim are placed at the entrance to the garden, back into the garden. God's enduring presence is inaccessible.

And in the book of Exodus, we see God act to save his people. He rescues them. He brings them to his mountain. They enter covenant with him. And then they break covenant. He nearly wipes them out. Moses intercedes.

God allows a tabernacle to be built. It represents his presence again. However, the innermost recesses of that tabernacle have cherubim sewn into the cloth that cover it.

[5 : 30] A symbol that access to God is restricted. Humans are sinful. Access to God is restricted. Only through sin being dealt with.

Only through an elaborate ritual and sacrifice can God be accessed. And then only in a limited way. And it's that which is the focus of Leviticus chapter 16.

It is the purpose of the day of atonement that we are going to discover together. So let's have a look now. And the background is set by verse one. Do you remember last week? Look at verse one and read these words.

The Lord spoke again, spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, who died when they approached the Lord. Do you remember last week? Do you remember that we heard about Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, that offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, that whose actions were contrary to God's command, just as Adam and Eve had acted contrary to God's command.

And so judgment came upon them just as it came upon Adam and Eve. And verse one reminds us of these things. It reminds us that the God we are talking about is pure and holy and just.

[6 : 38] And when sin is committed before him, he has a number of possible actions, doesn't he? And you can work them out for yourself. Since he's too pure to look upon iniquity, one possibility is that he just rids himself of the sinner.

That's what he did in Leviticus 2 with Nadab and Abihu. The second possibility, of course, is that to get distance from the sinner and himself, he vacates. That is, he leaves sin and the sinner behind, leaves them to themselves.

That is exactly what he had indicated he'd do when Israel sinned in the incident with the golden calf back in Exodus. He said, I will leave them. But Moses intervened. And God allowed for a third possibility.

He allowed the possibility that sin could be dealt with, therefore allowing himself to remain among a sinful people. He allowed the possibility, in other words, of atonement for sin, the possibility of a pure sanctuary.

And in verse 2, we begin an overview of the instructions given to Aaron by Moses. In your outlines, I've given some headings that you could fill in if you wanted to remember what they were.

[7 : 41] They are these. First instruction to Aaron is to take care entering God's presence, which is represented by the most holy place. He alone is to enter. He alone is to enter and only once every year.

If appropriate care is not exercised, he will die just as his sons did. Two. In verses 3 to 5, he's told to make sure that when he comes in, he brings the right animals with him.

In verse 3, he's to bring a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. In verse 5, he's to take two male goats for a sin offering from the Israelite community. Later on, we'll find out exactly why.

So first, take care in entering the most holy place. Second, make sure you bring the right animals with you. And now look at verse 4. Aaron is told to put on the sacred linen tunic with linen undergarments next to his body.

He's to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments. So he must bathe himself in water before he puts them on. Now, for us, this might seem like pretty elaborate wear.

[8 : 47] But actually, it's normal priestly gear, not high priestly gear. So he's to take off his high priestly gear and put on normal gear. He's to be one among many rather than separated from the many.

So he's to take care entering the holy place, make sure he brings the right animals, and he's to wear the right clothes when he goes in. And fourth, he's to make atonement for himself and his household. He's to do that with the bull.

And you can see that in verse 6. Fifth, he's to make atonement for the people with some goats. And this is outlined in 7 to 10, but we're going to look at it in a bit more detail when we get later.

He's to take care entering the holy place, wear the right clothes, make atonement for himself and his household, first with the bull, then make atonement for the people with the goats. And now those things are spelled out in a lot more detail in verses 11 to 28.

In verse 11, Aaron brings the bull for his own sin offering. It is slaughtered to make atonement for him and his family. And then, do you remember the censer from last week?

[9 : 49] He fills the censer with burning coals. And then he throws in two handfuls of incense. Presumably, this creates a great cloud of smoke, which is added to in verse 13.

And it appears to be designed to create some sort of smoke screen to conceal the atonement cover within the sanctuary. Without the smoke, he might die because he'd be looking at it.

Anyway, in the smoky haze, he takes bull's blood and he sprinkles it on the atonement cover. Purification is made for him and for his family. Okay, now it's time to turn to the two goats mentioned in verses 15 to 25.

In verses 15 to 19, he sacrifices the first of the goats as a sin offering, not for himself this time, but for the people. Then he goes back through the curtain again and sprinkles more blood on the atonement cover.

And through all of this, the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites is atoned for. And then the same thing is done for the tent of meeting outside, outside the most holy place.

[10 : 55] In silence, alone, Aaron is there exercising his high priestly ministry. And the result? Atonement.

Atonement for Aaron, atonement for his household, atonement for all Israel. And then in verses 20 to 26, we come to an event that's even more foreign than the previous ones for us.

Look at what happens. In verse 10, we've been told that the second goat has been chosen by lot. In the older English translations and even in ours, it's called a scapegoat. Perhaps in contemporary language, we might call it an escape goat because that's exactly what that word means.

An escape goat. Anyway, Aaron is now in the tabernacle courtyard. Look at verse 21. He lays both his hands on the head of this live goat and confesses over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites.

I imagine that took him some time, actually. All their sins. And he puts them on the goat's head. Now look at verse 22. The goat is said to carry on itself all the sins that were mentioned back in verse 21.

[12 : 09] And then it's sent out to some remote place accompanied by a human companion. And then it's let loose. The transfer of sin is so pronounced that this human who took the goat out into the wilderness has to cleanse himself rigorously in verse 26.

Finally, as you can imagine, all the cleaning up after all of this. The corpses of the animals are taken outside the camp and they're burnt up. And the person who does this washes themselves before coming back into the camp.

I want you to take special note, though, verse 29 and 31. In our versions, verse 29 talks about the people denying themselves. In verse 31, the same thing is mentioned.

Most of the chapter, you see, has been concerned with priests, hasn't it? However, now it's all the people who are to deny themselves. The words are largely only used in the Old Testament of the Day of Atonement.

What's being spoken about is humbling yourself. It may involve fasting. What happens on this day, you see, this one day of every year is very significant. It has to be a Sabbath day, a day of rest, a day of reflection, of contrition, of fasting.

[13 : 17] The effectiveness of this day requires the people of God to come humbly and contritely before God. And God responds by providing a way of forgiveness and atonement.

Now, before we wrap up this little explanation and move on to the rest of the Bible, I want to reflect on two words that are commonly used when we talk about this sort of thing. I want to define two words.

Here are two words that are used often in relation to sin and sacrifices. One is the word expiation and the other is the word propitiation. Expiation is the act of atoning for sin.

Propitiation is satisfying the person against whom the sin has been committed, in this case God, and who's rightly offended, in this case angry at sin. Think about the first goat.

It is clearly, isn't it, a substitute for the sins of Israel. The goat dies in their place because of their sin. Or the second. So the first goat has to do with expiation.

[14 : 18] It atones for sin. It's the means by which sin is forgiven. The second goat has to do with propitiation. It shows us that sin is taken away, removed, removed to a place unknown so that it no longer causes offense.

In the language of Psalm 103 verse 12, it is removed so far away, it is removed as far away as the east is from the west. So there's the account of Leviticus 16.

Let's see if we can sum it all up. What do you think God is teaching us from this? What do we learn from him through this passage? Well, the first thing we learn, of course, is that the goal of the day of atonement is what?

That God can remain living among his people. That has been God's goal from the beginning of creation. It is, and before, it is seen in Adam and Eve in his presence in the garden.

It is seen in the redemption of his people from Egypt. It is seen in what he does in Christ. And it's seen at the end of the Bible in the garden city pictured in Revelation. This is God's goal in his world, that he lives among his redeemed people, that he is their God and they are his people and they live together.

[15 : 35] Second thing we learn is that this great goal in God's world is unable to be accomplished by humans. Humans are sinful. God is holy and pure.

To live in the presence of God requires God to do something to deal with the problem. It requires God to act, to give atonement, to forgive, to redeem, to restore. And it can only come from him.

But there's one more thing that's striking from this passage. It's not what it says, but it's what it assumes. You see, this passage assumes that the heart of humans is inclined always toward evil.

This passage promises forgiveness. Forgiveness restores after sin. Forgiveness enables humans to have access again to God and to have him live in their presence.

But the assumption is that every year the day of atonement will be needed again. Why? Because we know what humans are going to do.

[16 : 36] Why? Because the inclination of their hearts is always on evil all the time. In Genesis 6, the heart is incurably ill. What is needed is a new heart, you see.

And that is what the prophets of the Old Testament yearn for. As Ezekiel puts it, what is needed is not just a cleansing from impurity, but a new heart and a new spirit. A spirit that will enable the people to follow God's decrees and keep his laws.

Friends, it's that future to which the Bible is headed. Now, what I'd like to do now is briefly reflect on how this is explored in the rest of the Bible. And the first thing to say, which to me is striking, is that the day of atonement is only mentioned sparingly through the rest of the Old Testament.

You read the Old Testament, it pops up in one or two places, but not much more than that. They're scarce. Therefore, it's left to the New Testament to pick it all up.

And it does. And it does so with vigor. The New Testament makes clear that Jesus fulfills this day in a remarkable way. Jesus is a high priest like no other.

[17 : 46] His sacrifice is like no other. He has no equal in terms of high priesthood. His sacrifice has no equal. He has fulfilled the Old Testament day of atonement in such a way that it need never be repeated again.

And more than that, he has fulfilled the whole sacrificial system in the Old Testament so that none, none, none of its sacrifices need to be repeated again.

He is God's final climactic yes to all that they looked forward to. Let me explain by taking you through the book of Hebrews. So open up your Bibles into Hebrews if you could.

So up towards the back of your Bibles, work back from Revelation and you'll find Hebrews. First, there's one that's not mentioned in your outlines.

And it is this one. Do you remember Aaron the high priest? Do you remember that he dressed down, not dressed up? He became a normal priest, not the high priest.

[18 : 53] What's the equivalent in the New Testament? We see it there. Can you see in Hebrews chapter two? If you have a look carefully, you'll see it as bold as anything.

The rite of Hebrews starts off this way. Verse 14 of chapter two. Since the children have flesh and blood. He too shared in their humanity.

He dressed down, as it were. So that by his death, he might break the power of him who holds the power of death. That is the devil. And free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

For surely it's not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason, he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, so that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

Can you see it? He becomes a human so that he might be a high priest for us. Next, he did not need to do the first act that Aaron and his descendants needed to do.

[20 : 02] He didn't need to offer any sacrifice for himself as they did. He did not need to. Why? Because he was without sin. Look at Hebrews chapter 7.

So flip through in Hebrews to chapter 7, verses 26 to 28. Speaking of Jesus, it says, such a high priest truly meets our need.

One who is holy and blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he doesn't need to offer sacrifices day after day.

First for his own sins, then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness.

But the oath which came after the law appointed the son who has been made perfect forever. Friends, please understand this is the glory of Jesus.

[20 : 57] Jesus, a perfect high priest, holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, who has no need to offer a sacrifice for himself.

For he was without sin. He knew no sin. Now turn to Hebrews 9. It builds on this. Look at verses 11 to 14. It tells us that Jesus did not enter a physical temple on earth.

No, he entered a heavenly temple as high priest. And into that heavenly temple. He didn't bring the blood of bulls and goats. No, look at verse 12.

Our high priest entered into heaven itself. He went into the heavenly most holy place. And he offered his own blood.

And he offered it once for all. Listen to that. You see, he didn't have to repeat this action day after day, year after year. It was a once off offering.

[22 : 00] And its impact was overwhelming. Verse 14 makes it clear. The blood of Christ through the eternal spirit offered unblemished to God cleanses our consciences so that we might serve a living God.

And now look at chapter 10. Look at verse 3. The writer makes the point that the annual day of atonement was actually a continual reminder of sins.

But an atonement offered by the blood of Jesus in the eternal most holy place doesn't need to be repeated. And no repeat means he did its job the first time.

Now look at verse 12. It tells us that when Jesus offered for all time the one sacrifice for sin, he sat down. At the right hand of God.

It was done. Now look at verse 14. By his one sacrifice, he made perfect forever those who are being made holy. Well might he sit down. It had been accomplished.

[23 : 03] Redemption was satisfied. Sin expiated. The wrath of God satisfied. Propitiated. Now look at verse 18. Sacrifice was no longer necessary.

Now look at verse 19. Friends, these words are grand beyond measure. No access behind a veil that had cherubim stitched across it.

No something much more grand. Because of Jesus, we now have access to the eternal God. We need not fear. There are no cherubims keeping us out anymore.

If we are believers in Jesus, there's no sin barring our access. And so we have confidence, even boldness to enter beyond the veil into heaven itself. For there we have a great high priest over the house of God.

Friends, the goal of access to God has been accomplished. There is no inaccessible place. We are there. God is our God.

[24 : 06] Jesus is our great saviour, our great high priest. We are God's people. Atonement has come. And it is all of God and all, all, all of him.

But there's more. You see, a transformation has taken place not just in heaven. For in fulfilment of Ezekiel, new hearts have been given. A transformation has happened in us.

And that's picked up in Romans 8 and Hebrews 8, if you want to read it later on. But there's even more. In the Old Testament, the Day of Atonement had part of its process, the release of a goat into the wilderness.

It also has echoes of what Jesus has done. You see, Jesus bore our sins on the tree. He died bearing our sins.

And he was buried. And with him, our sins were buried as well. And then he rose from the dead.

[25 : 12] And just as death could not hold him, so we are no longer bound in our sins. They are taken away further than a goat could ever carry them.

Deeper than a goat could ever go. Friendship. Fellowship. Untainted access to the living God is possible.

Friends, how marvellous beyond comparison this is. We have a perfect saviour. A blameless high priest without equal.

A sacrifice unmatched. And an advocate in the heart of the heavenly most holy place at the right hand of God who ever lives to intercede for us.

So friends, as he has offered himself to God on our behalf. In view of God's great mercy to us in Jesus.

[26 : 21] Let us offer ourselves back to him as living sacrifices. Holy. And pleasing to him. Let's pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father, in view of your great mercy to us in Jesus.

In view of the sacrifice of your son. We offer ourselves back to you as living sacrifices. Holy and pleasing to you.

Please, Father, help us to serve you. In ways that are shaped by this great event. By the great sacrifice of your son.

Our great high priest. We pray this in his name. Amen.