

IN MY PLACE CONDEMNED HE STOOD - The Biblical Pattern of the Atonement - Part six - Sunday, July 3rd, 2022

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

WHY CAN'T A LOVING GOD JUST OVERLOOK MY SIN IF I'M SORRY FOR COMMITTING IT? A Careful Look at the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16

Leviticus 16:1-10, 15-16, 20-22 - “The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the Lord and died, [2] and the Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. [3] But in this way Aaron shall come into the Holy Place: with a bull from the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. [4] He shall put on the holy linen coat and shall have the linen undergarment on his body, and he shall tie the linen sash around his waist, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy garments. He shall bathe his body in water and then put them on. [5] 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.[6] Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. [7] Then he shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting. [8] And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. [9] And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord and use it as a sin offering, [10] 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.”

16:15-16....”Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. [16] Thus ***he shall make atonement*** for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses....**16:20-22....**And when he has ***made an end of atoning for the Holy Place*** and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. [21] And 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. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. [22] The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.”

To this day this is by far the ***hub*** of all of Israel’s religious observances.

Yom Kippur, the ***Day of Atonement***, is observed for the very first time in today’s text. Passover was celebrated at the beginning of each year. The Day of Atonement was celebrated in the fall of each year. Both were to be celebrated annually. They were never to be forgotten.

The Hebrew verb ***“kipper”*** is most commonly translated into English as ***“to make atonement.”*** I hope you notice that it occurred four times in the verses we read. And I’m arguing that it carries a meaning that includes, but goes beyond ***forgiveness***. True, it ***results*** in forgiveness, but reaches it in a very specific and careful way. I’m arguing that the idea of atonement has at its core the ***expressing, and yet diverting, of God’s just wrath.***

In other words, while atonement is mercifully **aimed** at accomplishing forgiveness, it doesn't **begin** with forgiveness. Atonement is never **blind** forgiveness. It is forgiveness at great cost. It is forgiveness that reaches our hearts via the fulfilling of justice. A price is paid and forgiveness is won.

1) **THE MEANING OF BIBLICAL TERMS MUST BE DETERMINED BY THEIR TEXTUAL USE AND NOT BY OUR CULTURE'S PREFERENCE**

I'm thinking specifically about the two terms we're studying in this series right now - **Passover** and, now, **atonement**. Both terms face squarely the wrath of God. They both carry the idea of forgiveness. But neither one deals with forgiveness **merely** as **forgetting** or **overlooking** or **putting up with** sin.

We overlook sin and put up with sin and forget about sin because we can't help but get **used** to sin. We forgive and forget because we know we've done the same thing to someone else, or something similar. We've upset friends by our thoughtlessness. We've made promises we haven't kept. We've lost our tempers. So, unless we're just incredibly short sighted (and we sometimes **are**), we just forgive those same faults in others.

But it's all different when we deal with God. God is a being who does not know what it's like to be less than absolutely perfect. Not ever. That means there is no way for Him to **relate** to sin. His very nature means He can't possibly be sympathetic toward it. So **how** does God come to forgive sinners? His **being** won't allow Him to tolerate sin any more than your being will allow you to breathe under water.

So there's a sense in which, even though God **is** infinitely loving, it's much **harder** for God to deal with sin than it is for **you and me** - sinners - to deal with it. And that's where these Biblical terms come into the picture.

I'm going to look at two Biblical stories that reveal the meaning of **atonement**. We aren't going to study the whole teaching of these passages. I'm just **referring** to them to point out the meaning of **atonement** in Biblical usage:

- a) **Numbers 25** describes the occasion when the Israelites committed sexual immorality with the Moabite women and began worshiping their gods. The text says "***the Lord's anger burned against them***"(3) and He caused a plague to break out against them. Moses tried to deal with the situation by putting the ring leaders to death as per the Lord's instructions (4-5).

While all of this was going on an Israelite man brought one of these women right by the tent of meeting to be with her. This so enraged **Phinehas**, the priest, that he left the meeting with a spear and followed the couple into their tent. He drove that spear right through the man and woman's body and pinned them to the ground (7-8). And immediately, when this happened, the plague of the Lord was stopped!(8).

Now for the strange part of the story. While we may have thought the actions of Phinehas extreme, the Lord had nothing but praise and reward for what he did. And here's where the idea and explanation of the key term - **atonement** - comes into the story:

IPAD TEXT - Numbers 25:10-13 - "And the Lord said to Moses, [11] "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has *turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy.* [12] Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, [13] and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God *and made atonement for the people of Israel.*'"

Notice carefully, what Phinehas did, he did in anger. The text is clear - “....he [Phinehas] was jealous with *my* jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy”(11). So, what Phinehas was manifesting was *God’s anger* against this sin. There was nothing *personal* in Phinehas’ violent actions. No one had wronged *him*. He was acting out, according to the text, *God’s* anger against this sin.

There’s more. In carrying out God’s wrath against this couple Phinehas actually *protected the rest of Israel from the plague of judgment God had sent* - **Numbers 25:8** - “....[Phinehas] went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. *Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped.*” - **IPAD TEXT**

Verse 13 makes this point even more striking. *Why* did the plague of God’s judgment stop right at this point? How could the death of this one wicked couple stop God’s wrath from continuing on a whole nation? “....and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.” - **IPAD TEXT**

So the connection between *wrath* and *atonement* is unescapable in this passage. God's *wrath* was expressed and *then* the people were spared. You can see the pattern of the events of the Passover repeated again.

- b) **Numbers 16** makes a similar point. The Lord sends a plague on the people because of their faithless, persistent grumbling in the face of all His care and provision (41). Again Moses and Aaron must respond. Moses tells Aaron to offer up incense to the Lord to stop this outbreak of God's wrath:

IPAD TEXT - Numbers 16:46-47 - "And Moses said to Aaron, 'Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the Lord; the plague has begun.' [47] So Aaron took it as Moses said and ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense and made atonement for the people."

Again, the only point I'm making is there is a consistent link between **atonement** and **wrath** (manifested in these accounts in the plagues God sent). Yes, the people are spared. Mercy triumphs. But not **automatically**. Atonement must be made for the people's sin.

So remember, **atonement** is the provision made for the removal of God's just, righteous **wrath**. It **results** in forgiveness. But it's **more** than mere forgiveness. It deals with the issue of how sinful, fallen people can exist in the presence of an absolutely just God. It was easier, in a sense, to be delivered from **Egypt** than it was for a sinful people to live near to a **holy God**.

In fact, this is the issue that brings about the specific instructions in our opening text on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16:

2) **IT IS NOT EASY FOR SINFUL PEOPLE AND A HOLY GOD TO LIVE IN THE SAME CAMP**

This was the painful discovery of the Israelites after they made their exodus from Egypt. God would go with them. And that caused all sorts of problems. In fact, the whole ceremony of the Day of Atonement had its roots in just such a disastrous encounter:

IPAD TEXT - Leviticus 16:1 - “The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the Lord and died....”

There is no mistaking the purpose behind this opening reminder. Everyone in Israel would remember the occasion recorded in Leviticus chapter ten when Nadab and Abihu approached God disobediently. In stark simplicity the text says “....**fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them**”(16:1).

So, with this reminder, everyone feels the urgency of listening when God tells the people how they are to deal with their sinful hearts **before** getting too close to Him. Sinful people **need** to know the specifics of **atonement** where a holy, just God is concerned. And it's the condescending mercy and love of God that labors to reveal just how this is to be done.

But why can't God just **not** do this to sinful people? Why can't He just accept them and leave them alone when they come before Him? Those sound like such reasonable questions, but they betray a misunderstanding of God's essential nature.

You can see an example of this when Israel comes around the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses will receive the Ten Commandments. The people will wait at the bottom of the mountain. But they are specifically told they mustn't **come near** the mountain or **touch** the mountain because **God** is coming to that mountain. And if sinful people touch even the **base** of the mountain while God is there in His unguarded presence - full strength, so to speak - the people will die.

And now we start to learn. God can't **turn off** His nature like you turn off a light-switch. He is what He is. And what He is - by nature - incinerates impurity. God's wrath isn't an emotional fit. It is **unaffected, uncompromising, justice**, not **warped energy** out of control. Fallen people can't come before God **without atonement** for the same reason a spaceship can't land on the surface of the sun. The sun just is what it is. And the spaceship, as it is, is in no condition to deal with it.

3) **ATONEMENT AND THE TALE OF TWO GOATS**

IPAD TEXT - Leviticus 16:5-10 - “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. [6] ‘Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. [7] Then he shall take the two goats and set them before the Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting. [8] And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for Azazel. [9] And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the Lord and use it as a sin offering, [10] 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.”

More explanation is given:

IPAD TEXT - Leviticus 16:15-16, 21-22 - “Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and *bring its blood inside the veil* and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, *sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat*. [16] Thus he shall make *atonement for the Holy Place*, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And *so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them* in the midst of their uncleannesses....16:21-22....And 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. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. [22] The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.”

How will God show the coming substitutionary work of Christ in all its effects to these people so early in the unfolding revelation of redemption? You can't both slay a goat and show that **same** goat carrying away sin. Dead goats don't carry anything anywhere and God wanted to show His people that He wanted to do more than just **pay** for their sins with sacrifice. He wanted to **remove** their sins from their lives.

The sacrificial goat was slain in the holy place. No one saw that shedding of blood. And all of those references to the holy place and the tent of meeting and the mercy seat show the effects of our sin on **God's** side of things. Something about my sin needs to be made right **before a just and holy God**. There must be some kind of **satisfaction** before God. His wrath must be dealt with, just as in the case of the Passover lamb.

Even if God is faithful to just forgive my past sins, there may well be others. How will I continue to function before a **just and holy God**? God's justice requires satisfaction. A price must be paid. That's the meaning of the slain goat.

But there is also the **human side** of forgiveness. My record needs erasing. I need **deliverance** from sin's bondage. That's where the second goat - the **scape-goat** comes into the picture. The scape-goat was sent out into the wilderness. And on its head were the confessed sins of the people. This actions shows that the death of the **first** goat does something **active** that couldn't be **demonstrated** with a dead goat. The **same** sins that were paid for - **expiated** - by the blood of the **slain goat** on the altar were now **removed** from the people by the **scape-goat** into the distant recesses of the wilderness.

God is trying to visibly show these people how forgiveness works. Back to the question of our title today - "Why can't God just ignore my sin if I'm sorry for committing it?" The Day of Atonement is God's answer to that question. **Forgiveness** should be simpler for Christian people than it is for a Holy God. We are called to freely forgive **on the basis** of the costly forgiveness - the **purchased** forgiveness - we have already received from God the Father through the death of God the Son.

In other words, **all of the hard work of forgiveness has already been done by the Godhead**. We would be wicked hypocrites if we didn't extend freely what we have received so freely. Blessed beggars should be the first to bless other beggars.

But the process of forgiveness is never the same for a just and holy God. For our own good, and true to His just nature, He never **just** forgives. A holy, just God never has the same luxury He has purchased for His redeemed children. In these two goats of atonement we have pictured the **whole story** of divine forgiveness. The first goat is **slain**. The **sacrifice** has been made. That means the wrath of a just God has been poured out on the substitute for sin.

And then there's the second goat. Please notice, even though the first had been slain for the people's sins, those sins still had to be **confessed** over the second goat. **Confession** and **repentance** were needed to symbolically **place** those sins on the head of the appointed scape-goat. I wonder if Paul had this picture in mind when he said, **"For our sake he made him [Christ Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"**(2 Corinthians 5:21). - IPAD TEXT

This is atonement. This is our joy! Atonement does something marvelous both with the blight and stain of sin **and** a holy God's required wrath and punishment against it.

So the picture of that second goat was designed to teach that this costly forgiveness wasn't automatically received. Repentance and confession were made **visible activities** in the Day of Atonement process. And finally, those sins were carried away from the people. God doesn't just deal with my sins in a **technical** fashion. His grace is **experienced as deliverance**. As far as the east is from the west, He has borne my sins away(**Psalm 103:12**).

But there's more. Get a picture of Aaron, wrestling with that second goat. How badly do you want to repent of your sins? Picture the effort of getting a **two-handed grip** on the bobbing, bucking head. And then see him struggle to **hold on** while he lists and confesses **all** the sins of the people, all the while holding on to that live goat. How long did that take?

Wrestle through repentance. Don't just calmly agree that, yes, you're a sinner. After all, nobody's perfect. **List** your sins if you don't want to be constantly repeating them. Think them through. Pardon is **free**, but it's not **casually entered into**. What a picture of the **effort of deep repentance**. This is not **earning righteousness**. It's **laboring over thoroughness in repentance**. It's refusing to take any sins lightly - even very little ones - even very common ones. This is how free atonement is embraced and entered into. This is the path into that grand substitution of Christ's righteousness for your sin. Without this, the wrath of God remains!

No wonder, the great puritan **Thomas Goodwin** said, "**Lay hold of Jesus Christ with two hands! That is, with all your might, and confess all your sins....as that high priest did over the head of that live goat!"**