

## Atonement in Leviticus

Over the next weeks, we will be exploring the theme of Atonement in the Bible. There are MANY theories on this but they all seek to answer the questions—what saves us? What are we saved from? What are we saved for? How does it work and what do I have to do to receive salvation?

Next week I'll be preaching on a story of salvation and healing in Acts, then Sam will lead us in a contemplative service focused around John Driver's book which provides 10 different images of atonement in the NT, then Mary will preach on salvation and atonement in Luke. Then we will have our joint worship service the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of July and conclude with summaries of atonement theories in August.

I am relying heavily on Perry Yoder's commentary on Leviticus, which is part of the Believers Church Bible Commentary series. Today we start with Leviticus and the Day of Atonement—animal sacrifices, impure vs pure, scapegoats and other equally puzzling and disturbing topics. I read and re-read Perry Yoder's commentary on Leviticus because it is so hard to wrap my 21<sup>st</sup> century mind around concepts and contexts that are so very foreign to me. We need to do this hard work though to understand Jesus, the Jew and to understand what the NT writers were saying about what saves us and purifies us.

5 books in the Torah—1<sup>st</sup> 5 in our Bibles—Gen, Ex. Lev, Num, Deut. (1.-5. Mose)

Covenant with Noah—not to destroy (Genesis)

Covenant with Abraham and Sarah—chosen to inhabit land, to multiply and be a blessing for all nations

Enslavement—dramatic liberation (Exodus)

God makes a covenant with the people through Moses--the 10 commandments are a primary piece of that.

How are we a people of God? Who exactly is this God? What does God require of us? What does it mean to keep the Covenant and what happens when we mess up?

Leviticus--How do we live with the divine presence in our midst, in a tent at the center of the camp? There is not yet a temple, and the ark of the covenant is being carried around in this tent filled with religious symbols and objects.

First half is all about establishing right worship—rituals going along with that. The second half is more about individual morality and the whole book provides guidance for when things go wrong and need to be made right.

At this point in the bible story, God is not human and humans are not God, so how do we live together?

And how do we worship this holy God?

What is holiness anyway?

Biblical Holiness means to be set apart for a purpose. This otherness of God who says, I am your God, you are my people. Let us commune together in ways that won't destroy you because my purity is dangerous to approach with impurity.

Pure and impure have to do with approaching God in an appropriate/proper way. Impurity is unavoidable. The type of impurity will determine the cleansing needed. Some food choices cause defilement and others do not.. For some impurities a person need only to launder their clothes, bathe and wait until evening and no priests or sacrifices are required. There could be certain skin conditions or the growth of a certain mold in the house. these things do not transgress God's commandments but people still need rituals of purification in order to worship a holy God.

Being unclean does not mean a person has sinned. Giving birth causes impurity, but is clearly not a sin. In other cases committing a certain kind of sin can make you also impure. These things are related but not the same. There are rituals for both.

Holiness, sin, and purity--How do we worship this holy God? Sacrifice is not God's original design in the garden, but already we see Cain and Abel in Gen. 4 sacrificing. And God has a preference although we don't know what it is based on. HE had regard for Abel and his sacrifice and not for Cain. Nowhere does it say God needed it.

There is debate around whether God needs/requires animal sacrifice. Or whether the people need sacrifice.

Lev. 17:7 gives us a reason—so that they don't worship demons/idols. All other surrounding cultures at that time were worshipping their gods through sacrifice. So perhaps this is an accommodation God offers to the people because they need it. God lays out what kinds of sacrifices God will accept-- "pleasing aroma to God." I know that smelling BBQ's happening in the summer is a pleasing aroma to me too! To take that one step further, animals are still sacrificed for our well-being, are they not?

There is nothing about God's wrath needing appeasing. Stark contrast with other ANE cultures. There is also nothing about sinners all deserving to die in general for being human/sinful. The sacrifices related to forgiveness are for specific mistakes made. There are few individual cases in which there is a death sentence, but this sacrificial system is not about paying off God to not kill you. This tells us something about the character of God.

It is God's commitment/covenantal steadfast love and desire to commune with God's people that motivates this whole sacrificial system. This is how you know that things are right between you (individually and as a people) and God. It's very concrete. You do this and you're good to go. We often struggle with knowing if we're forgiven. Knowing if we've done enough to atone for our sins. We struggle with feelings of guilt and remorse or conversely, wonder why some don't have feelings of guilt or remorse.

That brings us to the special day called the Day of Atonement/Cleansing. Note the placement of Leviticus--Right in the middle of the Torah and note that chapter 16 is in the middle of Leviticus—Hebrew literature puts the most important thing in the middle of the story, not at the end. —pay attention and meditate on its meaning.

Once a year they were to fast, rest and let the priest carry out this purging ritual. It is a cleansing of the tabernacle/sanctuary, so as to restore it to its original purity. The environment is polluted by the sin and impurity of the people. Not only the tabernacle, but also Aaron and his family need cleansing. And so there are rituals to eliminate the pollution from the tabernacle and from the entire camp. Purity allows Aaron and his sons to approach the holy—the objects and the

most holy of holies where God dwells. Impurity when approaching the Holy is dangerous.

Analogy: the pollution in the air this past week through the wildfires in Canada. None of us are individually at fault for that. There are larger things going on—effects of our collective sins against the earth, but also weather patterns that aren't as directly related to our sins. The air is full of pollution and is dangerous to breathe in. It needs cleansing.

The Day of Atonement/cleansing is the opportune time for the people of Israel to deal with the accumulated effects of sin that have polluted the environment and since it is to be done annually, it means the Israelite camp gets a clean slate for the new year.

If you just look at the word, “Atonement” and break it down into its parts, you see three words—at one ment. That communing of God and humans. That bringing together, that bond of relationship, that covenant of steadfast love and holiness. Cleansing so that we can be together.

On the Day of Atonement, no forgiveness of sins mentioned. It is a cleansing of the effects of accumulated impurity and sin.

I don't want to jump quickly to Jesus and the NT, but I will mention here the verse in 1 John 1:9 that says Jesus is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Cleansing and forgiveness are related but they are not the same thing.

How does cleansing work? Now let's look at what the next chapter says about sacrifices and particularly the blood of animals. What is it about the blood of animals that cleanses and purifies? Lev. 17:11 The life is the blood. The blood is the life. Life = blood (equivalence) (not location “in”). God gives the blood, and the blood makes atonement for your lives.

- Real respect for life of animals—both domesticated and wild game. Recognize their participation in life. If you kill animals the wrong way, it is like murder according to scripture. You have become a shedder of blood. The slaughter of animals is a holy action—set apart for a reason. And, there is a proper way to do it.
- Nature of sin—introduces death into the environment of the relationship with the God of life. God is a God of LIFE

- Blood— The blood represents life. Only sprinkled on tabernacle furniture, never on people. The blood makes the altar clean, not the person.
- God provides a way to commune, to be at one ment. God doesn't want humanity to have no viable way to live in God's presence.

Now, about those two goats. The word scapegoat was invented in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by William Tyndale for his Bible translation of this passage. That word isn't actually in the Bible.

- There were two goats. One for the Lord, one for Azazel who is perhaps a weakened demonic figure living in the wilderness; an attacking demon needing appeasement or a custodian of evil. Perhaps in this text denoting a place.
  - Aaron lays two hands on the goat for Azazel and it is sent into the wilderness bearing the sins of the people after the purgation rituals
  - The goat is a vehicle, not a sacrifice
  - A concrete ritual that helps people see that their sin is being taken away. It's done and removed.
- Leviticus is about being the people of God. Sacrifice is not done in order to belong to God but because they already belong to God and want to maintain that relationship. It's a responsibility to go along with this membership status. In Leviticus sin is a trespass, an action ignoring the bounds of membership in God's people. God could have forgiven the sins of an individual Israelite without any sacrifices or without any blood applied to the altar. Instead, God gave Leviticus to Israel as a guide to being God's people. Sin was not taken lightly. The forgiveness rituals enabled a member of God's people to make amends for damages done and to maintain a good relationship within God's people. In this respect forgiveness and cleansing were not cheap in Leviticus. it was the end point of a process. this is the context of Leviticus 16 & 17.
- The day of atonement-- One could compare it to an annual covenanting ceremony in which members pledge their willingness to be an active part of the community. This ritual may mark the beginning of a new church year and be a time of planning for the future; it may include reviewing the past year and taking stock of what was and was not done. The reflection might also include a group confession of where they have fallen short. How to clear the slate? In the past some congregations made the twice yearly ritual of communion to be that time to examine whether they were in a right

relationship with God and with their fellow believers. This practice has fallen by the wayside in most congregations.

- Another helpful ceremony might be a rededication for a church building that would remind people of the set apart reason for the building. Features within the building could be rededicated as objects that play a part in worship. The communion table comes to mind. In many congregations its place is at the front of the sanctuary, and it is a very visible symbol of Christ presence. In this sense, like the ark and cherubim, it points to the presence of the holy and whose presence the congregation is worshipping.

Forgiveness and cleansing are related but they are not the same thing. That was true back then for the Israelites and also true for us. We can forgive people in a moment, even when we don't feel forgiving, but the cleansing from the effects of the sin, whether we are the victims of someone else's sin or the one who has sinned against someone, is a process that can take a long time. Our means and methods might have changed, but God has given us the Spirit and other brothers and sisters to accompany us on that journey as we surrender ourselves and allow it to happen.

Perry Yoder says, "Understanding atonement in the Hebrew Bible is foundational for understanding atonement in the New Testament and how Jesus provided a fresh take on atonement. The NT writers interpret and reinterpret in order to make sense of the unfolding story of God communing with God's people. This is a very Jewish story and as hard as it is to put ourselves in that context, which is so foreign to us, we need to at least make an effort so that we can grasp the Good News of the God of Life who provides a way for us to commune in God's holy presence, which for us is through Jesus."