

An Introduction to the Day of Atonement

by Ron Bailey

The book of Leviticus teaches us about the importance of approaching God in God's ordained way, and the consequences of disobedience.

Duration: 43:27

Scripture: Genesis 10:1, Genesis 16:1, Genesis 25:9, Leviticus 10:1, Leviticus 16:1, Leviticus 25:2, Leviticus 25:9

Topics: "Atonement"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the tragedy that occurred in one of the leading families of the Israelites right at the beginning of their journey as a nation of priests. The sermon emphasizes the importance of learning how to gather to God and make Him the focus of our lives. The Gospel is described as God's means of reconciling humanity to Himself and restoring a relationship of easy fellowship. The sermon also mentions the story of King David bringing the ark back to Jerusalem and the importance of following God's instructions in worship.

Transcript

Good morning. It's good to be with you. I gather that quite a few folks are off on this conference.

Miss Crow in particular, I guess she's off on the conference too. I've been reading recently in the book of Leviticus. Just looking to see what your reaction is when I talk about the book of Leviticus.

I have a friend, and he's a lovely Christian man, and he always says that whenever he gets to Leviticus, in his daily Bible reading, he always sort of inwardly groans, because he knows he's going to get into territory that he doesn't understand and seems very, very repetitive. My reaction to getting into Leviticus is always excitement. It really is an amazing part of the scripture.

If you don't know the Bible very well, I'm not going to try and tell you the whole of the Bible, but let me put this in its context. Genesis, the first five books of the Bible, Genesis is the book of beginnings. The seeds of everything that happens in the Bible, for good and bad, all begin in Genesis.

Partway through Genesis, you pick up the story of a man whose name is Abraham, and from the one man Abraham, there comes a whole family that we know as the people of Israel. At a certain time, this people was down in Egypt, and the book of Exodus, which means the going out, is the story of how God brought his people, the Israelites, out of Egypt and set them on their way to a promised land, a land that was in his

heart for them. Before they got to the promised land, you've got Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy.

And the book of Leviticus is named that because it has to do with things that are linked to the tribe of Levi. The people of Israel were twelve, or if you like, thirteen clans of people, grouped together with one purpose that God had given to them. And the clan of Levi were given a very special task.

Their job was to represent all the rest of God's people in a unique way as his servants, as his priests. From the family of Levi came another family called Aaron, and that was the priestly family. And the book of Leviticus is all about the special functions of the Levites and the priests.

And you may think, well, what relevance does any of that have to do with today? Well, it has amazing relevance. And in fact, you will not be able to understand the book of Hebrews, at least, unless you've got some understanding of the book of Leviticus. We often sing and use lots of words, and sometimes I would love to stop the singing and say, Stop! What do you mean? What are you singing about? For example, this morning we were singing about the year of Jubilee.

Now, what's that all to do with? Is that to do with the queen on the throne, or the tube, or what's all that to do with? I was reading in the book of Leviticus, and when you get towards the end of the book of Leviticus, you actually have this story of Jubilee. Let me turn to Leviticus chapter 25. I discover these days that it takes me longer and longer to read passages of Scripture.

And it's good, if you have a daily Bible reading, I would encourage you not to take one that's too heroic. Don't do one that does the Bible in six months or something like that, because I think you'll get just hardly anything, you'll read it so quickly. Find one that finds your pace and read it at your leisure.

This is why you can't hurry reading the Scriptures. This is the book of Leviticus in chapter 25. You won't understand all these implications, but let's just begin.

And the Lord spoke to Moses in Mount Sinai, saying, Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I will give you, then the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in the fruit of it. But the seventh year shall be a Sabbath of rest to the land, a Sabbath for the Lord.

You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard. That which grows of its own accord of your harvest you shall not reap, neither gather the grapes of your vineyard undressed, for it is a year of rest to the land. And the Sabbath of the land shall be food for you, for you, and for your servant, and for your maid, and for your hired servant, and for the stranger that sojourns with you, and for your cattle, and for the beasts that are in your land, shall all the increase of it be for food.

And you shall number seven Sabbaths of year, seven times seven, and the space of the seven Sabbaths of year shall be to you forty-nine years. Then you shall cause the trumpet of the jubilee to sound, on the tenth day of the seventh month, in the day of atonement, you shall make the trumpet sound throughout all your land, and you shall make holy the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land, to all the inhabitants of it. It shall be a jubilee to you, and you shall return every man to his possessions, and you shall return every man to his family.

A jubilee shall that fiftieth year be to you, you shall not sow, neither reap, that which grows of itself in it, nor gather the grapes of it in your vine undressed. For it is the jubilee, it shall be holy to you, you shall eat the increase thereof out of the field. I won't read on.

I hope you could sort of pick up something of the excitement of it. The jubilee, the blowing of the trumpet. One of the things that it's good to do when you read the Scriptures, is really use your imagination.

Imagine what it would be like if you were there, and you were listening to this, and you were thinking, what is all this about? Imagine some of the years of jubilee. Sadly, I don't know whether they ever celebrated a year of jubilee. Maybe some here can tell me differently.

I don't know that they ever did this part of the commandment that God had trusted to them. Certainly when God took them away into captivity in Babylon, God said, it's so that the land can keep its sabbaths. You have not allowed the land to keep its sabbaths.

Now you're going to go away for 70 years, and the land will have 70 years of sabbaths. It looks as though they never did it. Because it took tremendous faith.

If you think about it, there was going to be the sixth year, God said to them, there would be sufficient harvest for three whole years. Because they couldn't sow, they couldn't reap in the seventh year, they couldn't sow in the seventh year, so they couldn't sow until the eighth year, so they couldn't reap until the ninth year. So on the sixth year, God was guaranteeing them at least a 300% increase in their harvest.

That takes some doing, doesn't it? To trust God for three whole years in the future. To believe Him. Looks as though they never did it.

But if you read this, you can kind of picture the excitement. And it talks about, it was going to be a time of liberty, a time of freedom. And if you think of that, it's a bit of a puzzle, because you say, why would the people of Israel need a time for liberty, if they were in their own land? If they were in their own possessions, if they were free, why would they need a year that brought freedom? And that's really what I want to talk to you about tonight, but this morning, I want to focus on one verse here, and then go backwards in time.

Did you notice what this day had to synchronise with? Here in verse 9, it tells them about counting the numbers, there were to be 7 times 7, 49 years, and then on the 50th year, this is what would happen. Verse 10, you shall make the 50th year holy, and proclaim liberty to all the land, and all the inhabitants thereof, and it shall be a jubilee to you. But in verse 9, it says this, then you shall cause the trumpet of the jubilee to sound, on the 10th day of the 7th month, in the day of atonement.

This is what happens so often when you read the Bible, you read one verse, and it links you back to another verse, and you have to go backwards, before you can go forwards. What's all this about? What's this day of atonement? This day of atonement is one of the most important truths that God has revealed to us. And for the people of Israel, God was explaining truth to them, almost, what he calls it, the elements, it was elementary.

It was like the building blocks of truth. He was explaining simple concepts to them. Things that they would go deep down into their subconscious, deep into their understanding, beyond their understanding, and later on God would explain these things to them.

So we need to go back a little bit, to Leviticus chapter 16. Leviticus chapter 16 is all about the day of atonement, Yom Kippur. That's the Hebrew for it.

But chapter 16 and verse 1 says this, And the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron when they offered before the Lord and died. So now we can't even start here you see, we've actually got to go back farther. Because when God begins to speak to the people about the day of atonement, he introduces the day of atonement by reminding them of something that happened, something that really was of tremendous significance.

And for that you need to go farther back still. So you go back to chapter 10 of Leviticus. This is progress, this.

It's kind of progress backwards, but it is progress. Let me remind you what happened. The people of Israel came out of Egypt by God's strong right arm, as the Bible says.

They came out with great power. God revealed himself to them in many wonderful ways. And then God brought them to himself at Mount Sinai.

And at that point they entered into a ceremony, into a covenant, where they became uniquely God's people. God says, all the earth is mine, but if you keep my covenant, and if you keep the words that I speak to, if you obey them, then you will be my special people. You will be uniquely mine.

And at that time they entered into a covenant with God, and God gave them the Ten Commandments and the judgments that you have in Exodus chapter 19 through to, well to the end of the book of Exodus. When you get beyond the judgments, beyond that basic law that God gave, God begins to speak to Moses and says to him, Moses, I want you to start collecting things. I want you to start collecting gold, and silver, and precious stones, and dyes, and certain kinds of cloths.

And you might have said, well what for? This hasn't been mentioned in the covenant. Nothing of this has been spoken of in the things that God has said to Moses when he brought them out. God says, I want you to make this collection of all these things.

And then God says, because I want you to build me a holy place, so that I can live with you. And if you think about it, it's absolutely breathtaking. God had promised these people that he would be their God.

He'd promised that he would guide them out of Egypt into a promised land. But now when they've entered into covenant with him, it's almost as though he begins to open out to them even deeper secrets of his heart. A longing that he hadn't revealed until they were truly his.

And the longing is this. He wants to dwell with them. He wants to live among them.

He wants to be part of what they're doing. So they have to build him a special mobile palace that they call the tabernacle. Not very big at all, only the habitable part of it would be about the size of this building we're in now.

Wasn't very big at all. And it had to be a holy place because God was a holy God. And God gave them very careful instructions as to how every part of it should be built, how it should be all joined together.

Very wonderful, very intricate. And then they put it together, they erected it, and the glory of God came down. And it was thrilling.

It took them 12 months to build it. So 12 months after they'd come out of Egypt, they're still at Sinai, they've built this tabernacle. They are the worshipping people of God.

First of all, before they can enter into that promised land, they've got to learn how they can gather to God, how they can be God's people, how they can concentrate on God, how God can be the focus of their lives. That's something God has to teach us as well. Very often when the gospel is preached, we preach and emphasize all the secondary things.

We emphasize things like forgiveness of sins. Important, but it's secondary. We emphasize things like going to heaven and not to hell.

Important, but it's secondary. What's the gospel all about? The gospel is God's means of reconciliation, of bringing men and women back into relationship to Him, so that they can be with God, so that men and God can be together amicably with easy fellowship. That's what the gospel is all about.

And for a year they built this building, which was a representative of the fact that God was going to dwell with them, but there was a sort of a tension in the building. Because the building that they built was to reveal God and to hide God. It was to show people how they should approach God, but it said in very strong and clear terms, no one can come near to God.

That's what it says in the book of Hebrews. It says while that tabernacle was standing, God was making this plain, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest. It wasn't clear.

The way in wasn't made clear. But it must have been very exciting. You imagine 12 months of work, behind them they've got Egypt, all that experience for 12 months.

Now they're beginning to be what God had called them to be, a nation of priests. Now they've got their tabernacle and it's all erected and the glory of God has come and they begin the process of their service of God. And right at the very beginning of it there's an enormous tragedy that takes place.

You realize this? Right at the beginning of this most wonderful point of their existence, there's a tragedy that takes place. And it takes place in one of the leading families. You dip into this and work this out for yourself.

Aaron's wife was the sister of a man named Narshan. Narshan was the prince of the tribe of Judah. In many ways he was the leader, the political leader of the people of Israel.

This family of Aaron was one of the central families of the people of Israel. It was at the heart of everything. It was one of the most prominent families.

It was one of the most high-profile families. And Aaron and his wife had four sons and these four sons were destined to serve with Aaron in the priesthood. They were to have a unique privilege.

They were going to draw near to God in the prescribed way that God had given to them. And right it seems in the very opening days of this new way of seeking and serving God the danger is struck. And it's here in Leviticus chapter 10.

Let's read from verse 24 of the previous chapter. There came a fire out from before the Lord and consumed upon the altar This is God's presence making itself known in this new house of God. It consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat which when all the people saw they shouted and Nadab and Abihu the sons of Aaron took either of them his own censer that's a metal container with holes in it that you put incense in or frankincense and you set it glowing and then you swing it and it lets out its

smoke and smell.

Nadab and Abihu the sons of Aaron took either of them their censer and put fire therein and put incense therein and brought near maybe your bible says offered really means brought near brought near strange fire before the Lord which he commanded them not and there went out fire from the Lord and consumed them and they died before the Lord.

Please use your imagination and think about this this is this is one of the greatest days of Israel's history this is what they were destined for to be the people of God to serve him to be a nation of priests here they are they have the tabernacle day one everything beginning to function all the excitement all the thrill of it and in the midst of this these two sons of Aaron decide that they will they will approach God in their own way we need to understand that in terms of our approach to God I did it my way carries a death sentence it's not bravery it's not imagination and creativity in terms of coming to God I did it my way carries a death sentence that is only one way that you can come to God and these chose another way and it seems so harsh to us but God was teaching these people and

teaching us the extreme seriousness of certain things you cannot just amble into the presence of God you can't come into the presence of God with your own effort you can't come with your own worship you can't come with your own songs you can't come with your own creativity you can't come with your own way you cannot do it your way you can only come to God God's way there is no alternative and here it is written stark black and white this was so severe it goes on you see in the next verse verse 3 that Moses said to Aaron this is that the Lord spoke saying I will be sanctified in them but come near me and before all the people I will be glorified and Aaron held his peace that means that he was quiet do use your imagination when you read passages of scripture like this and think what this

must have been for Aaron he's just seen two of his sons struck down this is one of the central families of Israel all Israel know what's happened here it's so important that they continue to serve God they're not allowed to grieve they drag these two bodies out and they continue in their dedication to serve God it was a very sobering moment for the people of Israel there are times when God apparently allows very severe things to happen to make us understand do you remember a long time after this 300-400 years after this when King David was victorious he was God's man he was God's choice God's blessing was upon him he was the anointed one he was moving in the strength that God had given to him and in tremendous excitement David decides that he wants the ark back at the center of the nation

he wants the ark back in Jerusalem and they begin to bring it and they carry it on a cart it's fairly heavy they're dancing, they're singing they're worshipping God this is the high point the ark of God is coming to Jerusalem it's wonderful everyone is excited and at a certain point the oxen stumble the cart is shaken and the man who's walking alongside just puts his hand out to steady the ark and falls down dead and you say what kind of God is this taking us patiently through this inspired history of his people showing us how seriously he judges these things how serious it is that we approach God in God's ordained way and not in some other way you see God had said very specifically that the ark had to be carried on the shoulders of human beings not put on carts not dragged in by some

newfangled method there's nothing new in that sense in the sense of novel in Christianity we cannot afford to have the novel in Christianity God has ordained certain ways in which we must come for him and if we go off on some other way we do so at our peril these seem frightening things don't they I hope they do I hope you read these things and feel a bit chilled when you read them I hope you read these things and

say what is all this why is this so significant well let's go to Leviticus chapter 16 and you'll see that it's in this kind of context that God explains how people must approach him and the day of jubilee that we'll talk about more tonight I hope really has to synchronize with the day of atonement it is only possible because of the day of atonement it isn't possible because God

is somehow kind of particularly generous every 50th year or because every now and again God says ok we'll give everybody a new chance we'll reset all the clocks we'll put everything back to zero and I can do that because I'm God no there's a basis to what God does and that's why God said this day of jubilee had to be synchronized with the day of atonement you have to understand that the only reason that the day of jubilee is possible is because of the day of atonement it's only possible for men and women to be set free for their debts to be cancelled it's only possible to understand something fundamental about the sin issue God isn't like human beings human beings say they're there it'll be alright don't worry what you need is a better self image you ought to go to a psychiatrist and he

will tell you that you're not nearly so bad as you think you are and really you've got to think better of yourself that is not the teaching of the Bible the teaching of the Bible is that we really are much worse than we think we are but God only reveals that to us in his grace when he's ready to do something about it there are some Christians now who are strongly against what they call worm theology I don't know whether you've come across this phrase it's because of things like there are one or two places in the Bible where the people of Israel seem to be referred to as worms and it's it doesn't do much for your ego when you kind of think of yourself as a worm this will tell you something about my character when I was a young Christian I guess in my late teens about 18, 19 God spoke to me

so strongly about this whole issue that I was nothing in his sight outside grace that it was only because he loved me that I had any significance that I actually wrote out a poster of this and stuck it on my bedroom wall and it was some consternation to my mother when every day she cleaned my bedroom saw this poster of our bed that said I am a worm and no man I was working through something but I was educating myself I was allowing God to teach me that outside God I was nothing with no significance no dignity no inherent value it's only because that's what God regards me as being in himself in his redemption that I have any lasting intrinsic value in him so God has to teach these people that there is great seriousness in all this because something has happened to the human race something

has happened which means that man and God cannot have the easy fellowship that we read them having in the book of Genesis you know you get this impression that God it was his patent to stroll in the cool of the day with Adam and Eve to walk amongst the trees and the cool breath of the day and it was so easy and so natural and so much what man had been created for but you can't go back to that because something has happened to our human race and the consequence of what's happened to our human race and God we have become what the Bible calls sinners and that doesn't just mean that we do bad things I don't know what you would put as number one as your most terrible sin but sin is really a clash of wills sin is actually me saying no to God now don't think about murder or child abuse just

think about this simple definition sin is me saying no to God and ask yourself is there any area in my life where I am saying no to God because sin separates inevitably and you can't just step over it you can't just ignore it and hope it will go away you can't just whistle a cheerful tune and hope that everything will be alright tomorrow something has to happen to deal with this and that's what the day of atonement is all about it's all about God giving them a picture as to how sin would be dealt with it's complicated you'll need to read it slowly and think about it it's complicated because two things are happening on the same day the

priest Aaron who did this particular ceremony part of this day is for his benefit because he himself was a sinner and because he was a sinner he had to

bring offering for sin himself he had to find something that would pay the price to remove the sense of offence so that there could be reconciliation between God and man and Aaron had to do that for himself let me just go through very briefly these things and leave you to read this chapter and work it out for yourself and work out the implications of it there were animals that were used in it and these animals were representatives in fact they were substitutes now a church this close to a football ground ought to understand what substitutes are substitute is someone who takes your place you come off the pitch and somebody else goes on the pitch and from now on he is the one who is playing the match and not you and the way that God illustrated this to his people was with animals and they

had these animals and these animals were to represent to be a substitute for the people themselves and the priest put his hands upon them and he identified himself with this animal so that from that time on it was as though whatever happened to this animal that was happening to the person for whom the animal was a substitute and then it brought in this fact that these animals had to die and this is the consequence of sin the soul that sins it shall die it doesn't always work out immediately in physical death Adam lived for 960 years before the undertakers got hold of his body but he actually died on the day he sinned death comes in with sin so death has to be part of this price that is paid to remove this sense of offense atonement it's one for those of you who are interested in those

things it's one of the very few theological words that comes from Anglo-Saxon and you can use it for this at-one-ment it made things that had become separated one, it brought them to at-one-ness that's what atonement means that's not the best translation for the word that's used actually means to cover something and you have this picture language of the way in which people had sinned they had become unfit to be in the presence of God but God covered the stain of their sin but not only that God found something which would pay the price the penalty for their sin a substitute you had this amazing thing which this story goes on in different sections and think about the implications what does this mean one of the things that they did and it sounds a bit gory but they took two goats and they

confessed the sins of the nation over the goats and one of the goats was then executed let's use that word not just slaughtered but executed one of the goats suffered the death penalty because it was bearing the sins of the nation you following this? bearing the sins of the nation and consequently it suffered the death penalty but in fact there were two goats and this is one of these times in which you almost need to come and merge these in your mind because these two goats really are representing one central truth but they separate out into two goats so that you can see two aspects of truth the one aspect of truth is that the soul that sins it shall die the sin bearer must must be executed must suffer the death penalty but then there's another truth here because one of these other goats

was known, maybe it's called in your Bible the scapegoat and it's an odd thing that every dictionary definition in the whole of the world uses the word scapegoat wrongly it uses it to mean somebody who gets blamed for everybody and gets it in the neck in fact the scapegoat didn't get it in the neck the scapegoat was called the scapegoat because it escaped it did not die in fact in the picture language of it it carried the sin that it was bearing far away from the presence of God so there would be no consciousness of the sin in God's presence all these amazing things it's all symbolism it's all ceremony the blood of these animals did not take away sin the blood of these animals did not make people fit to be in God's presence it was all symbolic it was all sign language in fact what it was

all talking about was Jesus himself the one who would come into our world and be identified with us as part of the human race and would see that identification right through to its bitter end even death on the cross where he would bear in himself the death sentence and suffer the execution that our sin rightly deserved but in doing it he would actually carry sin away from the presence of God so that it would make it possible for God to treat me to use another strange way of talking just as if I had never sinned I could be justified by faith because of what Christ had done on the cross this whole event on this day of atonement made everything else possible in fact if this event had not happened every single year for the people of Israel that would have spelled that end Moses once said the

only thing that distinguishes us as the people of God is your presence everything else these blessings you can get them you can lose them you can give them you can take them the thing that identifies us as God's people is your presence that you are with us but God actually said to them I am a holy God I can only dwell in the presence of a holy people and the people weren't a holy people so God would not have been able to fulfill his intention of dwelling amongst them except that every year they went through this ceremony which was a picture of the fact of their own sinfulness and that something else suffered in their place and made reconciliation possible so that God could continue to dwell with his people and it went on year in year out year in year out again and again every single year

and because it happened every single year the book of Hebrews tells us that actually that's God's way of telling us that this really was only symbol that this event in itself was not taking away sin it's not possible for the blood of sin of bulls and goats to take away sin that sacrifice was just a picture it was not in himself the true value the true worth what sacrifice then could pay the price what sacrifice could make it possible for God to be righteous when he forgives what sacrifice would make it possible for God to treat us as though we had never sinned and to enter into fellowship with us and enjoy our fellowship well the one who is the sin bearer the one who is the Lamb of God Jesus himself he died what did you think he died for did you think he died so that you could be forgiven

for your sin yeah but that's secondary do you think he died so that you could go to heaven up to help yeah but that's secondary do you think he died so that you could be part of the church yeah but that's secondary he died says Peter to bring us to God that's why he died everything else is secondary he died to bring us to God without him there could be no way that's why Jesus himself and these are the words of his own personal testimony I am the way the truth and the life no one comes to the Father but by me there is no other way doesn't matter how simple it is doesn't matter how elaborate it is doesn't matter how complicated doesn't matter how religious it is I guess Nadab and Abihu were religious people but it it doesn't do it it won't do it it can't effect what needs to be effected no

amount of effort that you put into it no amount of imagination that you put into it no amount of value or cost that you put into it it doesn't matter what you put into it you can't do it I did it my way we'll carry the death sentence that's why you and I have to come in humility in recognition that really we have absolutely no contribution that we can make to this and we come to him who alone can pay the price him who alone can take away this great gulf between God and man he alone who can take away sin it's a very wonderful thing we'll come on to the consequences of it tonight all the blessings all the freedoms and before tonight I'm going to stop now but before tonight I'd like you to think about this was the day of jubilee and the year of jubilee was that for people who weren't God's

people or was that for people who were God's people in other words when we talk about the year of jubilee is that part of our evangelism our understanding of our evangelism or is it part of God's continual

process to make sure that his people stay free and stay his let's have a word of prayer it is complicated Lord it is when we try to express it in these terms and try to understand it but I do pray Father that in our spirits in our reactions in our emotions you will speak to us of the extremity of these things that you will make it absolutely clear to us that there is no way into the presence of God there's no way for God and man to be reconciled there's no way for God and man to be in fellowship there is no way except the way that God himself has ordained it's not by my effort it's not

by my repentance it's not by my contrition and energy it's not by my tears it's not by my resolution it's not by my will it's not by my family or the church that I'm part of it's not possible by any of these means it's only possible because of what Jesus has done I do pray Lord that you will centre every one of us absolutely rock solid and four square on this simple truth there was no other good enough to pay the price of sin he only could unlock the gates of heaven and let me in he only could restore access to God Lord Jesus we thank you we thank you for taking our place for putting on our strip for being absolutely identified with what we had become not pretending for but being absolutely one of us thank you thank you for going to the place of death thank you for praying the price thank

you for opening up the way so that all men might now come to God through him we love you Lord we thank you and we put our trust in you Amen

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