

The Day of Atonement

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Date: 14 August 2016

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[0 : 0 0] I'm sure you can relate to having a conversation on any given topic when the problem is too much information. Not necessarily in the sense or not in the sense that you're being made privy to information that is confidential or inappropriate, but that it's simply too much information to process. And I think we can feel a bit like that when we come to the Day of Atonement, and not only the Day of Atonement, but very particularly what it points to with regard to the atoning, saving work of Jesus. Now, as I was commenting before the reading a few weeks ago, we began to think about these God-appointed festivals that God's people participated in in the Old Testament. And we took a wee break for a couple of weeks and are now returning to that. And the festival, the feast, the day that we're considering this evening is the Day of Atonement. Now, the last one that we looked at, if you recall, or if you were present, was the Feast of Trumpets. And the difficulty we had there was there was so little information about it. It's declared, and there's some passing references, but really, very little. And so, it's actually quite difficult to establish what was it about.

Now, with the Day of Atonement, the problem, if indeed it is a problem, is there's so much material. In the Old Testament, the chapter we've read is replete with information, with detail, with all manner of data for us. But, of course, not only the chapter here, but throughout the Old Testament in different occasions, but also in the New Testament, very particularly in the letter to the Hebrews. And we read one small part of that letter that deals very explicitly with the Day of Atonement and how it is fulfilled in the work of Christ. So, I wouldn't say there's too much information. I'm sure it's just the right amount, but it is a lot to process. And for that reason, we need to be ruthless in focusing in on the big ideas or realities that are revealed by the Day of Atonement. And look at each big idea as found in the Day of Atonement and paralleled in the atoning work of Christ. Maybe if you want to try and picture visually what we're going to try and do.

I don't know if when you're watching the news sometimes you have seen, I'm sure you have, occasions when there is a location that wants to be highlighted, maybe where there was a crime committed or some demonstration was taking place, and the producers of the news broadcast make use of Google Earth. And they start way up with the wide-angled view of the whole of the planet.

And then very quickly they zoom in to the continent, to the country, to the city, to the neighborhood, and even to the very building or town square that is the matter of the news item. And it's remarkable, really, what can be seen from way up there. Well, if you have that image, what we're going to try and do here with the Day of Atonement is keep the camera way up there and look down on the Day of Atonement and indeed the cross of Christ, but from way up without going into the many and useful details, but that we simply cannot begin to enter into this evening. So that's at least the intention. We'll see if that's what we manage or what we achieve. Now, in making the comparison, the contrast between the Day of Atonement and the Atoning Work of Christ, which is what we're going to try and do, we need to identify and be aware of three key aspects of the comparison that will be drawn. First of all, we will be comparing between ritual and reality, between symbol and reality. In Hebrews chapter 9 and verse 23, the writer makes it very clear that that is the comparison that is being drawn. So in verse 23 of chapter 9 of Hebrews, we read, it was necessary then for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices and it goes on. And really the question or the word that's of interest there is this word, copies. And what's been said is that the Day of Atonement is a copy of the reality.

The ritual is a copy of the reality. Now, for us that seems strange because normally for us, a copy would chronologically follow after the original. You watch Antique Roadshow and there's this painting and they're trying to work out what it's worth and then they establish, oh, it's a copy.

[5 : 18] Now, when was the copy produced? Well, obviously it was produced after the original. It's inconceivable that you would do it before. It's just not possible. And so for us it's a little bit difficult to grasp this, but that's what being stated is that what happened way back then, way before Jesus performed His atoning work, is from the perspective of God, a copy of the reality. It's a shadow of the reality.

And in Christ we have the fulfillment. We have the real deal. We have the real thing in what Jesus has done. The ritual, the festivity, the symbols are just that. And then, and it's tied in with us of course, that we will be comparing that which is inferior with that which is superior. And that reality is one that the writer to the Hebrews is constantly stressing. He's constantly speaking of Jesus as superior to, and He does so in any number of ways. If we just notice one occasion when He does so in chapter 8 and verse 6, but the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs, that is the priests as the covenant of which He is a mediator, is superior to the old one, and is founded on better promises. So we're comparing something which is inferior, the Day of Atonement, inferior with something that is superior, that is the work of Christ. Now there we maybe just pause for a very brief moment and respond to a question that somebody could pose. Well, how do we understand that? What are we saying? Are we really saying that

God designed and mandated something inferior, something that can be questioned in terms of its value and efficacy? Surely God doesn't do that. Surely everything God does is good and perfect.

And yet we're talking about the Day of Atonement as inferior. How do we understand that? Well, it is inferior, and that doesn't in any way place a question mark on what God has done because it was deliberately designed as something inferior. It's in the original design that it be inferior, intentionally incorporated inferiority. Why? That it would serve to point to that which was altogether superior. That's its purpose, really, that in contrast. That in contrast, we see the value and the perfection and the superiority of Jesus and His work. So yes, it is inferior. Yes, it is defective in a sense, but that's the intention of God.

He designed it that way. So let's think of the big ideas. If you've got the outline in front of you, we've just, for the aid of memory, just used words that all begin with the letter P, but that's neither here nor there. But let's just notice some of these key elements. We're taking this view from the satellite way up above, looking down and just drawing out the big ideas. I think the first big idea that is very prominent as we read the chapter on the Day of Atonement is that there's a problem, and the problem is the problem of sin. In the chapter that we've read, we see that the very circumstances in which this day was instituted were circumstances in which sin had generated a big problem.

[8 : 47] Beginning of the chapter, we read, the Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, who died when they approached the Lord. The Lord said to Moses, tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the most holy place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover. This is how Aaron is to enter the sanctuary area with a young bull for a sin offering. This is relating something that had happened, a tragedy that had occurred. The two sons of Aaron had died because they had approached this place without having dealt with sin. And the very fact that that resulted in such a tragedy, and maybe even that reality is, first of all, shocking. You know, what an extreme reaction to the error of these young men. And yet, even though we might find it shocking and maybe even somewhat repulsive, what it does emphasize is just how serious sin is. And the tragic fate of these two young men illustrates the problem of sin. It is a big deal. It is fatal if not dealt with as it needs to be. And the Day of Atonement, if we're talking about big ideas, it eloquently announces that sin is a problem. And of course, as we draw this parallel with our current reality and thinking of what Jesus has done, this problem is a continuing problem. The writer to the Hebrews describes the Day of Atonement as an annual reminder of the reality and gravity of sin. So, every year there was this one day where in a very dramatic way, invisible way, the whole people were reminded sin is a problem. Sin is serious.

Now, we can certainly say, as we think of ourselves today, how much we stand in need of such reminders. Now, it won't be celebrating the Day of Atonement for reasons that we'll discover in a moment, but we do need to be reminded of this reality. I was just glancing at the news, I think it was yesterday, and you get some trivial items of news, and I was drawn, as one is, perversely to trivial items of news. And it was an interview that somebody had had with Hugh Grant. Hugh Grant, the actor, four weddings and a funeral, and everything else. So, anyway, and he'd been interviewed on marriage, his view on marriage, and he was pontificating on marriage. Thankfully, I didn't waste time that I'll never gain by actually watching the interview, but I got the gist of it from what was reported.

And among what was reported, he said that marriage is very unexciting and unromantic, traditional marriage, faithful marriage. It's unexciting, it's unromantic, and that actually it's a good thing to have the occasional affair. Even for the marriage, it's good. It just gives the marriage a bit of an edge. And, of course, he says this, and people smile, and they think, oh, isn't this a bit of fun? Now, what he's talking about is sin. That's what he's talking about. He's saying it's good to sin. It's fun to sin. No conception of the gravity and the seriousness of sin and the consequences of sin in this life and in eternity. And is that not true of the society in which we live? So little conception of how serious sin is. Now, the Day of Atonement, if it does one thing, in all its intricacies, it shouts out loud, sin is a problem. But if we're talking about another big idea that is presented to us by the Day of Atonement, it could be, or we're proposing that it has to do with the purpose of the day. So having established that sin is a problem, we're told in all the instructions governing the Day of Atonement that there is a purpose behind all of this ritual. And it's stated very simply. In the midst of much that isn't simple, the purpose is stated very simply. In chapter 16, the chapter that we've read, in verse 30, we read,

Because on this day, atonement will be made for you to cleanse you. Then before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. So even if we don't understand all the details as to how this is secured, the ultimate purpose is very simply stated. And the purpose is this, that our sins be dealt with, that all our sins be cleansed. And of course, when we think of the work of Jesus, that most definitively is the purpose of His work on our behalf. Again, we'll be jumping back and forwards from Leviticus to Hebrews. But in Hebrews chapter 9 and in verse 14, we read, The removal of sin remains at the center of Christ's atoning work. It is at the center of His saving work. But His work, as the writer there identifies, the blood that He sheds is superior to the blood that was offered there in the most holy place. It secures for us not only external cleansing, but the cleansing of our consciences. So it goes deep in dealing with a deep-rooted problem.

So there's the problem clearly identified in the day, but also stated what the purpose of the day was. That takes us on to a third big idea that we find as we read the chapter, and that is what I'm calling the place, namely the place of encounter. In the third verse of chapter 16, we're given, or it's identified for us where this place of encounter is. There in chapter 16, we read, This is how Aaron is to enter the sanctuary area with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. And then it goes on to identify particularly within the temple complex, within the tabernacle, the most holy place as the place of encounter. This is the place where the alienated parties, this big problem of sin has created the separation between God and men and women, and how are they going to be brought together? There needs to be a place of encounter, and the most holy place is identified as that location. God and man to meet, to secure reconciliation. And in the ritual associated with the day of atonement, the emphasis is on how incredibly difficult it is for sinners to enter into that place in the presence of God. And in so many ways that the difficulties are identified, the meticulous cleansing that seems to be the purpose of the blood of God. And in the presence of God, the blood of the blood needed to be sprinkled in all the different places, and yet all of that, the big idea is that it's not easy for sinners to come into the presence of God. A lot of cleaning needs to be done to enable that to happen. You also have what we're told there in verses 12 and 13 of the incense that in the most holy place was used in order to create a, really a cloud that would separate the high priest from God, because the high priest, even the high priest, with all the cleansing that he would undergo, couldn't see God face to face.

[17:19] And this incense created this barrier, in a sense, to protect the high priest. So, to find a place where God and man can meet in friendship and security is no easy matter. And the Day of Atonement eloquently illustrates that. But then when we think of what Jesus has secured, and the place that he has secured for us where we can meet with God, the matter is altogether different. In chapter 9 of Hebrews, in verse 24, there we read, For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one. He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Jesus enters into heaven itself, the tabernacle, the most holy place, a copy of heaven. Jesus enters into heaven itself in our place and is able to meet face to face with his father and remain forever in the father's presence and open up the way for us to also enter into that place of encounter between God and man. Of course, we know that when Jesus died, you remember what happened in the temple, that when Jesus died, that curtain that protected the most holy place so that nobody could go in. Nobody could go in because only the high priest could do so once a year, duly cleanse.

So this great curtain to protect any potential intruder from the fate of going in unprepared, that curtain was rent in two, it was torn from bottom to top, and the place was opened. And that's speaking of how, because of what Jesus has done, we can enter that place of meeting, of encounter, of friendship with God himself. So a place is one of the big ideas here in the Day of Atonement, but then also a priest, the priest as a mediator. Aaron was that man. He was the one who went in representation of the people.

The people couldn't go themselves. Another had to go for them. And of course, one priest wasn't sufficient because it had to be done every year. And of course, priests would die, and other priests would take their place. A succession of priests would perform this function of a mediator.

Not so with Jesus. Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant. Jesus is the high priest who continually, and effectively, intercedes for us. Again, we read of how he is described in that way. In Hebrews chapter 8, we can read of what is said there concerning Jesus as a better mediator. I think chapter 9, and from verse 23. That's actually not the right reference. But even without finding the actual reference there in Hebrews, it's clearly stated there for us that Jesus is a superior mediator, a superior high priest who can represent us effectively and permanently. So a priest is central to the Day of Atonement. And just a couple more things that we can find in terms of big ideas.

And a very important one is one that we're calling here a price, the price of atonement. And one of the distinctives of the Day of Atonement, there are many festivals where sin offerings were made. So in terms of distinctives of the Day of Atonement, one of them was the two male goats that had to be employed in the ritual that took place. There in verse 5 of chapter 16, we're told that two male goats for a sin offering.

[21 : 40] The high priest couldn't approach God empty-handed. There was what we could call the price of atonement. And the price to be paid was that of sacrifice or the shedding of blood. As in Hebrews, again, we have eloquently stated in chapter 9 and verse 22, without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. And the need for sacrifice, for this price to be paid, permeates the whole ceremonial system. But in the case of the Day of Atonement, there is this peculiarity that we need to note and comment on, namely the two male goats. What can we say about these two goats? Well, both together are described as a sin offering, both of them. Both are so described. Both are intended to deal with sin.

Both speak of how sin is dealt with in their own way. The first goat, we've read the chapter. We won't make reference now to the specific verses, but we've read the chapter. The first goat was killed, and the blood sprinkled in the most holy place. And the sprinkling of the blood on the mercy seat that covered the Ark of the Covenant resulted in propitiation or safeguarding the priest and the people from the righteous anger of God because of their sin. And the blood secured cleansing and forgiveness. And as a result, God's righteous anger, not a capricious anger, but a righteous anger, was removed. Well, that was the first goat that was killed and the blood sprinkled. But the second goat, the more peculiar of the two in many ways, the one spoken of as the scapegoat, received a quite different treatment. The second goat wasn't killed at all. The ritual that we've read of there in the chapter speaks of the high priest placing his hands on the scapegoat and confessing over the scapegoat all the sins of the people. The sin and guilt of the people were in that way symbolically transferred to the scapegoat who was then sent out into the wilderness. And in that way, the removal of sin was illustrated or symbolized. As possible, some suggest that when John, John the Baptist, when he sees Jesus and he cries out, behold the Lamb of God who carries away or who takes away the sin of the world, he has in mind this scapegoat who carried away the sin of God's people into the wilderness far from them that it would no longer be held against them. So the two goats, with the first goat, sin is paid for, and with the second, sin is removed. And the very fact that two goats are required to, in a measure, copy the atoning work of Jesus, that in itself speaks volumes.

Jesus and His shed blood, His work, definitively and exhaustively pays the price of our sins. And symbols and shadows can only go so far in representing the reality. And that's the reason for the need for the need of so many of them. We say, well, why so many symbols? Why so many rituals?

Well, because one wouldn't be enough to even begin to represent the reality. But in the multiplicity of all these symbols and all these rituals, even then they don't do justice to the reality, but at least they can approximate to the reality when all of them are brought together and understood in their place.

price. The payment that needed to be made, the price of atonement. But then finally, you have, not so prominent in terms of big ideas, you have in the Day of Atonement what I'm calling participation. And I'm thinking of the participation of the people, of the sinners, the likes of you and me. In fact, the striking thing about the Day of Atonement is the lack of participation of the people. The people do almost nothing. They observe what is going on. That really is the extent of their involvement. You read the chapter and you find almost nothing about what the people do. In fact, the only participation we can find is what is said in verse 29. This is to be a lasting ordinance for you. On the tenth day of the seventh month, you must deny yourselves. And it goes on. In the chapter in Leviticus, it stresses this more strongly. You must deny yourself. What's that about? The call to deny yourself is essentially a call to repentance. It's a call to acknowledge the condition that requires the work of atonement. And this is what the people can do, and indeed it's what the people must do.

[26 : 42] In the absence of this repentance, what is going on in the most holy place will not secure anything for them. What is done there, the blood that is shed and sprinkled, all the ritual and all that it symbolizes is only effective in the measure that it is accompanied by the repentance of the people.

They need to repent and they need to believe. They need to trust that what is going on will secure their forgiveness. Now, in this regard, the situation for us today, when we think of what Jesus has done, it's no different, not in any significant way. We can do nothing other than repent of our sins and trust in the atoning work of Jesus on our behalf. And then all that we do is in grateful response to what He has done for us. And if we were to conclude this overview, I suppose, of the big ideas that we find here in the Day of Atonement as it symbolizes and points forward to the work of Christ, as we would draw them together and ask the question, well, how can we respond to all of these realities? What is the only reasonable and practical response to what the Day of Atonement points to and to what the atoning work of Jesus actually secures? Well, I think we can do no better than take heed to the call that is directed to us in Hebrews chapter 10, just following on from where the writer deals with all these comparisons and contrasts, where he highlights how the work of Jesus is so superior to the rituals of the Old Testament. He then concludes by calling the people to respond, and he does so in the language of chapter 10 and then reading from verse 19. And we'll just simply read these words without much comment to leave that as the challenge to us. From verse 19, he's following on. He says, therefore, in the light of all that we've seen about how Jesus' atoning work is so superior to all that is represented in the Day of Atonement and all the rest of the system, how are we to respond? Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, open for us through the curtain that is His body. And since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. And the call to persevere goes on. This is how we respond to what the Day of Atonement points to, but very especially to the reality of what was secured by Jesus for us as He gave Himself as a sacrifice for sin, and opened the way for us to that place of friendship and fellowship with God. Well, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Jesus. We thank You for all that He has done and continues to do for us as our High Priest. And we thank You for the entrance that we have that is demonstrated even as we pray, for even this prayer would not be possible were it not for what Jesus has done to open that way for us. And so we thank You for this, and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.