

The Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16:1-34

Dyak elders watch in a huddle as craftsmen apply finishing touches to a miniature boat. The craftsmen hand the boat to the elders, who bear it carefully to the edge of the river near their village, called Anik. While the entire population of Anik watches, an elder selects two chickens from the village flock. Checking to make sure both chickens are healthy, he slays one chicken and sprinkles its blood along the shore. The other chicken is tethered alive to one end of the deck of the little boat.

Someone else brings a small lantern, ties it to the opposite end of the deck and lights it. At this point each resident of the village approaches the little boat in turn and places something else, something invisible, upon the deck, midway between the shining lantern and the living chicken. Ask a Dyak what he has placed between the lantern and the chicken and he will reply, "*Dosaku!*" (my sin).

When every resident of Anik has placed his or her *dosa* upon the little boat, village elders raise it carefully from the ground and wade out into the river. Then they release the boat into the current. As it drifts downstream, Dyaks watching from the shore grow tense. Elders standing chest-deep in the river hold their breath. If the little boat drifts back to shore, or hits a snag and overturns within sight of their village, the people of Anik will live under a pall of anxiety until the ceremony can be repeated next year!

But if the little boat vanishes around a bend of the river,

the entire assembly will raise their arms toward the sky and shout, "*Selamat! Selamat! Selamat!*" (We're safe! We're safe!). But only until next year.¹

So writes Don Richardson in his book, *Eternity in their Hearts*. While we can easily understand the words of his description – except for the Indonesian ones – we have a bit more trouble understanding the emotion these people feel as they go through this experience year after year. It's foreign to us. We don't have anything like it.

- We don't have this sense of dealing with the impact of sin at a communal level. We're an individualised society. If people want to have some sense of dealing with sin at an individual level, well that's OK for them to do so – but don't try to impose something like that on us as a community.
- We don't have this sense of sin hanging over our communal heads creating some dark cloud that will infect the events of the coming year if it's not successfully removed.

But Israel did.

There are remarkable parallels between this story from Borneo and the Day of Atonement God gave Israel.

- Both happen annually.
- Both deal with sin.
- Both deal with sin at the communal level.
- Both involve sin being placed on an animal that's taken away from the community.

What the Priest Does

Because this is something that's so foreign to us, I want to

¹ Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts*, 115.

briefly run through the events of this day so we have a rough idea of what happened. First, I want us to think of the day from the perspective of the high priest. In Leviticus 16, this is Aaron. But as time went on and Aaron died and was replaced by other high priests, these instructions applied equally to them. What did this day mean for the high priest?

In all likelihood, it would start off like any other day – with the normal offering of the morning sacrifice of a lamb with a grain offering and a drink offering. There seems no reason to think there'd be any departure from that procedure.

However, after that, things change fairly dramatically.

- He's to secure a young bull as a sin offering for himself and a ram as a burnt offering for himself.
- He's to take off his normal high priestly clothing, have a wash, and put on special linen garments.
- He's then to secure the necessary sacrificial animals for the people – two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.
- He's then to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering.
- He's to create a cloud of incense by burning two handfuls of the proper incense on the appropriate altar in the Holy Place.
- With the cloud in place, he's to enter into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood of his sin offering in various places.
- He's to go out of the Most Holy Place and cast lots for the two goats – that is, he's to decide which one is to be sacrificed on the altar and which one is to be driven from the camp.

- He's to sacrifice whichever goat's chosen for the sacrifice and take some of its blood into the Most Holy Place and do with it the same things he did with the blood of the bull.
- He's then to sprinkle some of the blood of both animals in the Holy Place and then on the altar of sacrifice.
- He's then to get the live goat, place both his hands on its head and confess all the wickedness and rebellion of the nation of Israel.
- He's then to give that goat into the hands of the man appointed for the task – so that goat's taken to a solitary place in the desert.
- He's then to go back into the Holy Place, take off the linen clothes, have another wash, and put his normal high priestly clothes back on.

It's quite a series of tasks.

A couple of things stand out. **First**, why the change of clothes? The high priest's normal clothes were somewhat elaborate. They were specially crafted and embroidered according to God's instructions. They marked out the high priest as being God's representative. He stood out from others – even from the rest of the priests. Some have even suggested he looked like a king.

Yet, when he's to enter God's presence, he's dressed to look more like a slave. He must dress to suit the occasion. Among men, he's given clothing to mark the glory and dignity of his office. Before God, he's given clothing to mark that he's merely a servant of the King of kings. His clothing speaks of simplicity and humility. Before God, he's not some great man who can parade the grand finery of his office or his achievements – rather, he's a

mere creature, and a sinful one at that.

Secondly, why the great cloud of incense? Some think it's to hide his presence from God. You get this picture of a man going through all this elaborate ritual to create a smoke-screen so he can sneak into a place where he's not supposed to be. That's nonsense.

- It doesn't matter how thick you make the incense, it's not going to hinder God's sight.
- Besides, it's God who orders setting up this smoke-screen. He's hardly going to do that to pretend to somehow be deceived.

The cloud isn't set up to hide the high priest from God; it's set up to hide God – or the glory of God's presence – from the high priest. It's for Aaron's protection that the things of God are veiled by this cloud of incense – lest he be tempted to gaze on that which he should not and be struck dead as a result.

Thirdly, this is the only time any Israelite could enter the Most Holy Place. This is a unique event each year. God set up this tabernacle to symbolise His presence with His people. Yet, the Most Holy Place – the place where the Ark of the Covenant that symbolised God's presence with them is kept – is off limits. No one's allowed in. Even the priests aren't allowed in. Only the high priest is permitted to enter this part of the tabernacle – and only on this day after he'd set up his cloud of incense.

This was a very special day for the high priest. It was a day of special rituals and special ceremonies. It was a day when he was permitted to enter the Most Holy Place and live.

What the People Do

What about the rest of the nation – what's their part in this day? Is this day something just for the priests – or does it involve the rest of the people as well? At first glance, you may get the impression the whole focus is on the high priest and what he does. Verse 17 says no one else is to be in the Tent of Meeting while the high priest does his thing. Everyone else is to make themselves scarce. Certainly, it's true that the main attention of the chapter is on what the high priest does.

But the rest of the people have a part to play as well. That's explained in verse 29 and following. For them, the Day of Atonement is to be as a Sabbath. That is, they're not supposed to do any work on it. It's not a case of while the high priest's doing his thing, the rest of the people are out in the fields tending their crops or looking after their sheep or searching for gold or whatever they do each day. They're supposed to take the day off. It's a national holy day. It's not keep the economy going while the priest gets God's blessing for it. Rather, it's stop the economy and pay attention to what's going on this day. This is important.

Further, it's a day when they're to deny themselves or humble themselves or afflict themselves. It's an unusual expression. In Isaiah 58 it's associated with fasting – that is, it's associated with not having food. In Psalm 35 it's associated with wearing sackcloth and examining oneself and prayer. In other words, the impression is that the people are to seriously examine themselves on this day. It's not a day for going surfing at the beach. It's not a day to schedule a one-day cricket match or a work picnic extravaganza. It's a day for serious self-examination – for

contemplation about the holiness of God and the unholiness of me.

It's not a matter of letting the priest do his thing and as long as he doesn't botch the procedure then God'll bless us for the next year. Rather, it's a matter of entering into the spirit of the day – a spirit that focuses on dealing with things that aren't right between God and His people.

What's it about?

And that leads us to think about the focus of this chapter and the focus of what the Day of Atonement's all about. In other words: Why did God give them this day in the first place? What did these special ceremonies achieve?

The idea of *atonement* seems to be the main focus of what's happening. Hang on a minute, you ask, wasn't that the purpose of most of those other sacrifices back in chapters 1 to 7? Weren't they supposed to make atonement for people? Didn't they work properly? Do they need some sort of supplementary ceremony to complete their effectiveness?

The initial focus for what happens this day is on the sanctuary itself. God gave them laws about sin and wrongdoing. God gave them laws about cleanness and uncleanness. Those laws were intended to drive home to the people just how far they fell short of God's perfection. There's a huge gap between the holy God and His unholy and unclean people. Provision's made for the people to deal with their sin and uncleanness. Some of that's dealt with via sacrifice; some's dealt with in other ways as set out in the law. When the people become aware of some problem that makes them unclean, they're given the

means by which they could appeal to God for cleansing.

Yet, unholiness and uncleanness was a way of life for them. It came naturally. It invaded them and infected them in so many different ways. Sometimes – perhaps even many times – they didn't realise their failings. Some things were just part of everyday life as it were – part of their ongoing culture – and they didn't realise they'd offended God. They didn't bring the appropriate sacrifice. They didn't cleanse themselves in the appropriate way. They inadvertently came to the sanctuary in an unclean state – even though such a state makes them unfit to enter. God was gracious – He didn't strike them dead immediately. Yet such offence accumulated over time. It's pictured as building up and impacting the sanctuary. Their ongoing uncleanness has infected (as it were) the various holy furnishings of the sanctuary. God's house has become polluted and unclean and dirty.

Thus there builds up a threat to God's continued presence among His people. The unclean's come into the presence of the holy and brought pollution. That pollution must be dealt with. In His grace, God provides the means for dealing with it.

- The high priest – the one consecrated or made holy – is permitted to enter the Most Holy Place in order to cleanse it.
- The blood of sacrifice – the payment of the life of an animal – is provided as the means of cleansing.

By following this ceremony each year, God graciously provides the means for His continued presence in the midst of an unclean people.

Yet, this isn't simply some magical rite that the high

priest does on behalf of the people. At first glance, you could be excused for having that impression. The focus seems to be on the sanctuary and the high priest. The high priest's actions, while known to the people, are done in private away from any prying eyes. You could imagine the average Israelite could easily feel distant from the whole procedure. He personally didn't have any active part to play in the ceremony. As long as he knew the high priest had done his job properly and cleansed the sanctuary, he could get on with life as normal.

It's like the attitude most of us have towards the power stations. We know there are competent people in there running the plant and equipment. Some authority assures us those people are competent and they're doing their job properly. We don't really understand what they're doing and we couldn't do the job ourselves. But as long as the lights keep going on when we flick the switch, we're happy everything's running OK.

However, that's not to be the attitude of the average Israelite. They're not involved in this day just as consumers of the services at the sanctuary. It's a much more direct involvement than that. It's their uncleanness that's responsible for the need for the sanctuary to be cleansed. It's their uncleanness that threatens to drive God from their midst – or that threatens an outbreak of God's judgment. Thus, they're intimately involved in this day.

- They're involved in terms of setting aside the day to deny themselves and to examine themselves and to repent of their sins.
- They're involved in watching the scapegoat being taken out of the camp – along with their sins placed on it. God provides this picture of the need to

purge the nation of her sin.

The day reminds them of a number of things.

- It reminds them God's holy.
- It reminds them they're unholy.
- It reminds them their unholiness offends God.
- It reminds them there's a problem for an unholy people to serve a holy God.
- It reminds them that God, in His grace and mercy, has provided them a way to be cleansed from their sin.

How does the system work? For example, is it a system that's based on me achieving my own good standing before God by what I do? Some interpret it that way. They think God gave this system so people could earn their own salvation by making the right sacrifices at the right time.

- They'd committed the crime – they'd done the sin.
- God gave them a way to pay the punishment for their crime – to do something to cover their sin; to do something whereby they could say to God that they'd earned His acceptance because they'd done the right sacrifice.

I believe that's a misinterpretation of the system.

The system's an expression of God's grace. We often don't see it that way because we don't want to see it that way. We have a natural bias to want to be able to stand on our own two feet before God. That bias is because of our pride. Our problem's that we don't have a serious enough view of our own sin. We think it's only a minor thing – something that's fairly trivial and can be easily overlooked. We think sin's so trivial it can be made up

for by the death of a sheep.

But sin's not trivial. It's deadly serious. It's something that's huge beyond our imagination.

- It's something like a one-year old child declaring it's quite capable of looking after itself without any help from its parents or the government or anyone else and it wants to be independent.
- It's something like an Australian citizen blowing up the Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge and then expecting the Australian government to applaud those actions.
- It's something like a grown man ripping off his elderly mother's home and thinking that will have no impact on their ongoing relationship.

We're creatures who've rebelled against our Creator. We've told God we know better than Him. We've ignored God's instructions and done our own thing instead. And we think that taking another part of God's creation and burning it on an altar will somehow make up for our arrogant independence?

The death of a sheep or a bull or a goat could never make up for human sin. That wasn't God's intention in providing this system.

- The system reminded them that sin's serious. It deserves judgment – and the judgment it deserves is death.
- The system reminded them that sin destroys true relationship with God. When I rebel against God, I say something about what I think of God and what I think of how I don't want to relate to Him the way a creature should relate to Him.
- The system provided a way to express repentance –

a sacrifice could be brought. That acknowledged the sin and the seriousness of the sin.

- The system promised God would overlook their sin – not because that's what they deserved, but because God's a gracious and compassionate God.

What's it about Today?

The New Testament tells us the system also pointed forward to what God would do in Jesus. God didn't overlook their sin because the blood of bulls and sheep made up for it – God overlooked their sin because He knew the blood of Jesus would atone for it. God didn't cleanse the sanctuary because the blood of a bull and a goat made up for their accumulated uncleanness – God cleansed the sanctuary because He knew the blood of Jesus would provide true cleansing. In other words, the whole procedure of the Day of Atonement helps to explain what Jesus does for us.

Turn to Hebrews 9:24.

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. Nor did He enter heaven to offer Himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

God hasn't changed. God's still holy. The unclean can't come into contact with the holy and survive. But we don't have to worry about the issue of our uncleanness anymore because Jesus dealt with that for us. He paid the

true penalty for sin – and He paid it once for all time.

What's more, Matthew 27:51 tells us that when Jesus died *the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*

That is, the curtain that kept everyone out of the Most Holy Place, except the high priest once a year – that curtain was torn in two from top to bottom.

Hebrews 10:19 explains the significance of this.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened 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.

It's no longer a matter of just the high priest entering into the Most Holy Place once a year under the cover of a cloud of incense and in fear he could be struck dead if he gazed on the glory of God. Now we all have access to God. We can all enter the real Most Holy Place. We can all do it confidently. We can all do it in a cleansed state – for only that which is truly clean can enter God's presence. How is this possible?

- Is it because we've learnt to live lives that aren't infected by sin and uncleanness?
- Is it because we've found a way so we ourselves can somehow make up for our sin and uncleanness?
- Is it because we've earned God's favour?

No. It's only because we have a true High Priest who's truly cleansed us through His death on the cross for us.

And even more than that, we ourselves now become the Most Holy Place. Jesus' sacrifice has cleansed us – has cleaned out all the grubbiness and filthiness of our sin – so that God, by His Spirit, can take up residence in our lives. The pure and holy God dwells within us because Jesus washed us clean with His blood.

The one drawback of this new system is that I suspect we've lost some sense of the seriousness of sin. There's something about bringing a sheep to the sanctuary and slitting its throat that reminds a person this is a serious business – and a costly business. If I do that regularly, I'm likely to remember that sin isn't trivial.

But we don't do that anymore – because Jesus fulfilled the system for us. The cost He paid is far greater than the lives of a few animals. It's a price beyond imagination. Yet, the point is: He paid it – not me. He's the One who died – not me. I didn't pay any cost at all – He did it all for me. And so I'm tempted to treat sin as something trivial – to think it doesn't really matter. I can easily forget its seriousness. I can even be tempted to keep on sinning because God's promised to forgive me because of Jesus. How do I deal with that wrong thinking? One of the ways God has given us is the Lord's Supper. There we remember our sin. There we remember the price paid for us.

We don't have the Lord's Supper set before us this morning, but, as we bow in prayer, I'd like you to think about it – about Jesus' body broken for you; about Jesus' blood shed for you; about His sacrifice because of your sin. It's that serious. Respond in your heart in confession and thanksgiving.