

Time of Grace Ministry

“Want To Be Close To Me Again?”

October 1, 2006

Leviticus 16:1-2, 20-22

I lay my sins on Jesus; you can lay your sins on Jesus, too. And you can tell your children and your grandchildren that there's a safe place where they can go, where their sins truly are taken away. My dear friends:

We live near a pharmacy at our house, and on the concrete sidewalk in front of the pharmacy there are a curious collection of black dots. They're about the size of a silver dollar, and there are dozens of them. Can you believe there's such a thing happening? It's like concrete leprosy. Like, what is that? Do you know what that is? It's gum. Haven't you ever seen that? Go look at some retail place where you live and there will be black blotches all over the concrete and the door in front.

Now, how do those black spots come to be? Have you ever made one yourself, perhaps? I bet you have. Somebody here has done that - it's not just other people. Well, I think I know. It happens because some people are walking in and thinking, “Oh, I think I'm going to get a bag of Cheetos,” and since they're chewing gum they go, “Well, I'm going to be eating Cheetos in a minute,” and they spit their gum out and it's gone. The gum is gone. It's away. It has ceased to exist - out of sight, out of mind, out of existence.

Or, I was taking a little walk around our campus the other day, and somebody who had used a bus transfer got off on our street and said, “Well, I don't need this anymore,” and threw it away. Somebody will say, “I'm going to have some Ruffles; I'm going to eat some Ruffles.” They'll finish up the bag and threw it away.

Somebody said, “Have me some Cheetos. Love Cheetos; now they're all gone.” So they throw the bag away. Yep. Somebody said, “Have me some gum. First, I'm going to chew the gum and throw the wrapper away, then when I'm done with the gum, I'll spit it out.” Out it goes, wherever. Somebody said, “Have me a cigarette. Finished with my cigarette,” and threw the butt away. “Have some lunch at Mickey D's, finished the last of the double cheeseburger and threw the wrapper away.”

Have you noticed a pattern here? Where is away? Just because you don't think about it anymore; just because you don't see it, does not mean it has ceased to exist. Your trash just happens now to be on some little old lady's lawn. Every time, you know, a kid flushes the toilet and the stuff goes away, it ceases to exist. But guess what? It goes somewhere, doesn't it? When you flush, what happens? It just doesn't sort of disintegrate, or dematerialize and cease to exist, like a computer file where you simply de-digitalize all those “1s” and “0s,” and they become random nothings.

No, the stuff goes into a pipe, because some brilliant people have made a forest of pipes under the ground of this city. I'm not making this up, kids. This is really true. There is a forest of

pipes under our city, and they all go to the same place, called the Metropolitan Sewerage Commission - to the sewage treatment plant. And there, all that stuff that you flushed away ends up and is turned into fertilizer and clean water. So it goes back in the water system and it's fine again. But it didn't go away; it went THERE.

Now, here's my point. When you say, "Jesus has washed my sins away; I need my sins to go away, to be taken away," where's "away"? When people say, "Yeah, I threw my Cheeto bag away," well, it's not "away" - it's "there". And then what's going to happen to it from there? It has not ceased to exist. The Cheeto bag is still there; it is still somebody's problem. But when your sins have been taken away, they really are "away", and they will trouble you and plague you no more.

Now at this time of year, if you have any Jewish friends, you know that they're talking about the season of Rosh Hashanah - the Jewish New Year and the Feast of the Trumpets. They're talking about Jewish Thanksgiving. In the Old Testament times, they had the Feast of Ingathering. There's really a cluster of four things going on in the fall of the year that were mandated by the Lord in the books of Moses.

This is one of the three great worship festival cycles of the year, where every adult male (if he was able) was to present himself before the tabernacle, or before the Temple when that was later built. Three times a year, and this was the third. Passover was the first one, Pentecost was the second (which was the grain harvest, kind of like Jewish Thanksgiving), which took place in May or early June. And the third one was the other Thanksgiving. Jews really had two Thanksgiving times. The Fruit Harvest of Ingathering came in the fall of the year, right about now. The grapes and the olives, the figs and the dates, all came in at this time.

So, there was Jewish New Year - Rosh Hashanah. The first day of the New Year is when they calculated it. They also called it the Feast of Ingathering. The third festival was the great Day of Atonement. Yom is the Hebrew word for "day" and Kippur means "covering," so you have "the day of covering." And in our English language, that Hebrew morphing into Yiddish comes out as "Yom Kippur." You might have heard your Jewish friends talk that "It's time for Yom Kippur," or "Yom Kippur is this day." That's the great Day of Atonement, and that's what I want to talk to you about. But I'll just mention that the fourth piece of that cycle was their little home camping trip, where they had to build shelters in their backyards, like booths or little tents, and it was called the tent festival, or the Feast of Tabernacles, as it was officially called. All four festivals happened within a few weeks of one another.

I want to talk to you today about the third festival. Now, I don't know what people say today when you ask them, "What do you mean when you say, 'Yom Kippur?' What is this 'Day of Atonement?'" And unfortunately, the first instinct that people have when you want to get rid of a problem is to go for self-help.

If you go to a bookstore, there are racks and racks and shelves and shelves of self-help books, aren't there? There are those yellow and black ones, where there's everything you can imagine for dummies. You want to learn how to fix your own car; you want to repair your own computer? You want to learn how to do electrical stuff on your house? You want to do

plumbing? There's "Plumbing for Dummies." There's stuff on how to fix your families, how to fix your brain, how to fix your messed up childhood, how to get to be more productive, how to learn seven habits of highly effective people. There is more self-help stuff than you can imagine; and the first instinct when people look at the mess between them and their God (and all the while their consciences are guilty and making them squirm and making them depressed) is, "Well, what do I have to do? Tell me the rules; what are the tips for atoning?" And unfortunately, an awful lot of people think that "the atoning is up to me."

I am here to tell you today, and Moses is here to tell you today through what he wrote in the book of Leviticus and through a dramatic ritual that God set up, that it's not possible for you to atone for yourself. But not to panic, because God has set up a substitute. We've got to learn about this. This is important for everybody who wants a better relationship with God. And God's very simple message is this: if you want things to be fine between us again, listen up.

I want to tell you the story of what God set up for the great Day of Atonement, which is sometimes called the Good Friday of the Old Testament. Would you like to look it up with me in your Bible? We'll go to Leviticus Chapter Sixteen. Leviticus is a real churchy kind of word, isn't it? It sounds real religious. It's based on the first four letters, which spells the word "Levi."

Levi was one of the sons of Jacob who was not destined to inherit land. His tribe did not receive a portion of the divvying up of the property in the land of Israel. It was Levi's gift for himself and his descendants to be special servants of the Lord in the worship life of the people. They were given little towns where they could settle, but there was no regional tribal land of Levi. The Lord was their inheritance, or their portion. So, the book about the Levi stuff - about worship, about purity, about how to be right with the Lord - was called "Levi-ticus"; Leviticus. Most of the book contains regulations pounding in the concepts of ceremonial purity, things incidentally that you don't have to do anymore. We don't live under this covenant. And we don't live under the rules we're going to read about this morning either, but those things about the great Day of Atonement were set up with the intent to prepare people for the big atonement on Calvary.

And I want you to pay attention to this; this is very important. The drama that God set up was very instructive. It was not just a mindless ritual; it involved visual aids to help the people understand how they and God could be good again, instead of being in conflict.

One of the difficult things about the Old Testament times is that you and I think that they really had it tough because they didn't know for sure that the Savior was ever going to come. They had to trust in promises of something that as far as they knew, might happen or might not. They had to live in hope when it looked like their nation was very small and insignificant while God was calling them the chosen people.

For much (maybe most) of their national life, there wasn't much that made them feel like they were chosen. If you were an Israelite person, it didn't look like you had anything going on that the other nations would much envy. And that brief flash at the time of David and Solomon didn't last, did it? By the time that the Babylonians came and smashed the last remnants of the

Israelite army, burnt the last of the buildings, and stole whatever had not already been stolen, there was nothing left to be proud of.

And so, we might think that they really had it tough, although I think that they had a few things going for them too. Two things that really would have made being a believer in Old Testament times pretty amazing was that God intervened in human history much more directly than he does in your and my life today. Just think what it would do for your confidence if you could see that giant pillar of cloud by day and fire by night - amazing. Or, imagine if you had witnessed the ten plagues that smashed the economy of Egypt. There were many stories like that.

And the other thing that made it bearable to be a patient, Old Testament-waiting believer was that their worship life sizzled. It had drama built into it, and this is one of those instances where God designed a teaching event for them to participate in that would stick in the mind of everybody, from the youngest to the oldest - from the oldest grandpa seeing this ritual now for the fortieth or fiftieth time, to the kids who are seeing it for the first time.

I want you to come with me to the design of the Yom Kippur, the great Day of Atonement. It's in Leviticus Sixteen. First of all, pay attention to what's wrong. There was wrong occurring at the very highest levels. The first paragraph of Leviticus Sixteen is pretty creepy, bad news. Moses' brother, Aaron, was chosen to be the first high priest. He had very fancy, elaborate clothes; had little jingly bells on the bottom of his robe so that wherever he walked, it would say, "Look at me; look at me. I am representing God to you and I am representing you to God."

He had a chest piece on his chest with twelve enormous gemstones set in, one for each of the tribes. He had a turban on his head which had a golden plate on the front that said, in Hebrew, "holy to the Lord." He was the bridge (that's what the word priest means - "the bridge") between God and people. And he had four sons, Nadab, Abihu, Ithamar, and Eleazar, who were also consecrated into high priestly service. After Aaron would die, then one of those sons would succeed him as high priest. Only males from Aaron's family got to be the priest. So these were like the holiest guys in the whole nation.

So it says "The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord." Two of them, the older two apparently, Nadab and Abihu, were such arrogant fools that they busted in before the Lord and said, "Yeah, we heard what you said, but we're going to do it this way." And God stepped in with a violent intervention and sizzled them. He fried them to death with spiritual electricity; fire came out from the Lord and roasted them alive.

Now you're thinking, "Whoa, man! What?" These aren't some trashy sinners on the margins; these aren't some antisocial bad dudes who were robbing and raping and killing; these were two of the sons of Aaron, the high priest. Aaron is shocked and grieving - what is going on here? Like many fathers, he probably didn't raise them right; was probably pretty indulgent; and he didn't know, "Why, God, are you so upset?"

"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...'" What

does it say? “Or else he’ll die too.” “You have no right to come busting into my house like you own the place or as though you have a right to talk to me whenever you feel like it. Don’t get in the way of thinking that I owe you because the rot of sin is from top to bottom, in you and in the people you’re called to lead. You all have a problem with me and I got a problem with you.”

Sin is not just some quirky little thing like Adam and Eve, you know, swiping that apple or stealing a little fruit. That doesn’t seem like such a big deal, does it? We all kind of wink at that - “Oh well, it’s just a piece of fruit.” Mutiny against God brings death because his holiness will not tolerate any evil. And little evil never stays little. It’s like metastasizing cancer. Though it starts small, it can spread to the whole body and make everything sick. Holy God will have none of it in his Holy Temple or in his holy heaven. The Temple and the Tabernacle were designed to be miniature heavens on earth, and so God told Moses, “Don’t let Aaron just walk in here anytime he feels like as though it’s his right, or he’ll die too. You’ve got to do it my way because you must know that your sin separates you from me, and sinners die.”

Now, a few paragraphs later in Leviticus God said that “the life of the creature is in the blood, and I’ve given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar. It’s the blood that makes atonement for one’s life. You die for your sin. Sinners die; they are condemned and die - really die. They die physically and then die eternally in hell. Respect my anger.” And so, he set up this structure to teach people to “back off; only the priests may step before my bright cloud over the golden box, and then only in the way that I set up because I need to teach you about the Savior who’s going to come.” And if you miss it - if you try to do this your way - you will perish, and your sins will stick to you like those Cheeto bags and cigarette butts coming, like arcing right back into your hands, like Velcro sticking to you. Although you try to throw it away, it keeps coming back, and you walk through life trying to throw your trash away and it all just keeps coming back. By the time you’re twenty-five years old, you’re a walking trash heap because everything sticks to you. That’s what our sins are like. You can’t throw them away. Where is away? They come right back on you. Let God explain how things can be right between you and him again. And here’s what he said.

It’s a long chapter, and so we’ll have to skim ahead. I want to pick up just one little paragraph with you starting at verse twenty. Aaron was to sacrifice a bull for his own sins. He was to take a bowl and catch the blood. They killed it the slow way so they could catch the blood as it spurting out of the animal’s neck.

Man, if you looked at that you’d never forget it. Aaron was to know “that animal’s dying for you, Aaron. That should be you. You’re just as bad as your boys. You have problems with me, too, but catch the blood. Walk in, sprinkle it on the ark with your eyes averted, and then I want you to smear some on the horns of the altar too where that animal’s going to be burnt up. And I want you thinking ‘that animal instead of me,’ so that you see your sins went on that animal.” Then God said, “I want you to get two goats. Kill one of them, catch the blood, do the same thing - that’s the guilt of the nation. I’m going to let the entire nation see this animal bleed to death so that they will realize they don’t have to.”

And then, as if those two dramas weren’t enough... After all the sprinkling, Aaron has had his hands in the blood bowl at least twenty-eight times by now. And if he’s like a typical guy, he

probably splattered some on his clothes, too, so he's a mess. Now, "When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat." I don't know why God picked goats; I don't think there's anything inherent to goats. He just picked them because they were everywhere and they would have one and could afford it.

Now, look what they did with the live goat. That goat's buddy had just died a quick, violent, bloody death. Now, "He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat..." So Aaron took his bloody hands, which had just been splattering bull blood and goat blood twenty-eight times, and laid both of them on the head of the live goat "...and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites - all their sins." See the word "all"? I point that out so you spot it - all their sins.

And put them where? "On the goats head." So there is a transfer of responsibility to an innocent victim. If I was the goat, and if goats could think and speak, the goat would be saying, "Wait! I didn't do that stuff; it's not my fault. I had nothing to do with Nadab and Abihu's rebellion. I had nothing to do with the sins of unworthiness in the mind and heart of Aaron and all the rest of the nation. Get your bloody hands off of me! I don't want that responsibility, and I sure don't want the punishment that I see coming."

But God, in his mercy, arranged a substitute for guilty sinners. Can you see this drama in your head? You're standing there under the hot desert sky and you're watching this drama being enacted. And, I know, there were millions of Israelites, but I'll tell you what, on this day of the year everybody - whoever could get close enough - crowded around to see what was going on.

All their sins were put on the goat's head, "and you shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task" to make sure he gets the goat way out there. The goat will do what? Read this with me. The goat will "carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert."

So the goat is taking their sins away. And they could watch them leave because sins don't just self-destruct while they lie on you; they don't just sort of fizzle away like they have a statute of limitations, as if sin is bad for ten minutes and then it just kind of fizzes away and evaporates. No, it has to go somewhere. And God gave them this violent, bloody drama to help them get how this works; and frankly, he gives it to you, too. Even though we don't do the scapegoat thing anymore, literally, this is a foreshadowing of the big one that happened about two thousand years ago. And really, in all of its essential details, nothing has changed.

Where do our sins go? They go on the goat. And that goat was led far out of the camp, far away from where there was water, and everybody looking at it said, "He ain't coming back." One goat died a quick bloody death, and the other one died a slow death of thirst and starvation. But either way, God was teaching people that sin kills.

"Now, would you like to be close to me again? Put your hands down and stop trying to make your own self-atonement, your own self-help, your own do-it-yourself plan. Put it down and go to the great Day of Atonement." A day even greater than that Old Testament festival day was

the day on Mount Calvary when God sacrificed a lamb, the Lamb of God, for you and for me. And I know most of you know that already, but we forget, or we get confused or we try to change it, just like God was afraid that Aaron was going to change the worship and said, "Don't let him into the Tabernacle until I've got things explained to him, because it has to be done my way." You and I are always trying to change the rules because we always want to make excuses for ourselves. We always want to blame somebody else; we always want to rationalize away our sins; we want to minimize them; make it look like it's not such a big deal, and then we try to look for ways that we can make up for it.

We try to make it seem like "God must like me because I..." But when you put "I" as the subject of whatever's going to follow that clause, you're screwed. That's not a Bible word, I know, but I had to pick one that you would have heard before. It's true; you are. I have to make sure. You can't leave church today without being really clear about that. You can't do this yourself. So go to the cross of Jesus right now, sinners with me, and take your bloody hands with the messes you've made in your life, the stupid things you've done, the people you've hurt, the insults you've given to God, the neglect that you have done to neglect his holiness, the contempt and casualness you show about paying attention to his Word. All the messes you've made, the resources he's given you that you've squandered, gifts you've been selfish with, and on and on and on - all the rest of that stuff. Come with your bloody hands and put them on the Lamb of God right now, walk up to that cross and grab on to his bloody feet and get his blood on you and hold tight and say, "I am now putting my messes on you." That's how you and God can be good again. And after you've acknowledged the painful reality of your own unworthiness, there's such a freedom and such a relief in just admitting, "I need help."

Put it on Jesus; he's big enough to carry everything you've got. Whatever load you're dragging around, put it on him - he can take it. Don't insult him by saying, "I don't want to bother you," or "Let me try to work on this myself," or "I'll meet you halfway." Don't meet Jesus halfway! Let him come to you, and you put your hands on him and say, "It's all on you now, Lamb of God. You take away the sin of the world."

Isaiah said, "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." So give it to him. Whatever is bothering you, whatever is making you afraid, whatever is making you feel guilty, whatever you're ashamed of, all the shames of your life, whatever you've messed up and screwed up and balled up and tangled up and lied up and stolen, give it to him right now. Give him all your unworthiness. Put your bloody hands on the Lamb and say, "Now it's on you, Jesus. Thank you; all I'm going to say is 'Thank you.' I'm not going to say that I've got this coming; it's not that I deserve it. I'm not going to say 'You owe me this,' and I'm not going to say, 'Well, I'll do some and you do some.' No, it's ALL on you, Jesus."

And that great Day of Atonement, on Mount Calvary two thousand years ago, never wears out. Its power extended backward to cover all these people - that wasn't the goat that took their sins away, was it? That was the goat getting their minds on the great victim, the substitute who was to come. And that power from Calvary goes forward, unlimited into the future. It's big enough and powerful enough to cover you and me and everything that we need.

So right now, with me, let's get rid of all of our loads of sin. Pray with me now. "Jesus, we put our hands on you. We give you everything that's bad and evil and ugly and horrible and sinful in our lives. We're so ashamed. We are so grateful that we have a place to put our sins; now take them away. Don't just move them around a little bit, but take our sins away, our Great Scapegoat, our Great Lamb. Take them all away upon you and announce to us your forgiveness, your love, and your mercy. Lord Jesus, send your Spirit so that we continually - for the rest of our lives - believe that you are here for us every day to take our sins away."

Let the people of God say, "Amen."