

The Syntax of Sacrifice: Atonement

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[0 : 0 0] Well, one of the most painful and disorientating experiences in life can be estrangement, estrangement, distance, relational distance between you and a friend or family member.

Where there was once closeness, there is now distance. Perhaps it's been some argument or quarrel or perhaps a misunderstanding or we don't even know quite what's happened, but the next thing we know, we're not even speaking.

We're not speaking anymore are four very, very painful words. Perhaps for some of us here, that's happening right now with someone.

Perhaps it has happened. And I would think for most of us, even in the future, it may happen. And as we dive into Leviticus chapter 1, probably you heard the word entrails there more than you ever thought you might hear in a lifetime, let alone an evening.

But as we dive into Leviticus 1 and into talk of entrails and animals and sacrifice and burning and all of those things, we are arriving into a situation of, well, there is estrangement of distance.

[1 : 2 6] Of estrangement and distance, relational distance that's needing overcome. And it's a distance between God and his people. You don't even need to turn the page there just to look at the end verses from Exodus that Donald read for us.

We're going to look at those in a minute. Remember, God has saved his people. He's brought them up out of Egypt. You get the kind of boxing match of the century, don't you?

God versus Pharaoh. And God has resoundingly won. He's defeated Pharaoh. He's freed his people. They've come to the mountain at Sinai and he's given them the tabernacle, the tent of meeting.

He's done all of that. But do you see it? The very last few verses there, for however glorious they are, there is a problem. There's something that can't happen.

Just look down there at verse 34. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

[2 : 3 0] But what can't happen? And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

And do you get the juxtaposition of that? It's a tent of what? A tent of meeting. But there can't be a meeting. Can you see it? It's a tent of meeting where one of the parties can't come in.

It's just in the words. A tent of meeting. Yes, let's meet. But we can't meet. He can't come in. Sometimes children put signs on their doors.

My children aren't here tonight, so I can say this without giving them ideas. But they get signs on their doors, don't they? No parents allowed. No adults allowed. Or maybe they share a room with a sibling and they have an argument or something.

And the other sibling, they're not allowed. They can't come in. God is saying to Moses here, you can't come in. And what kind of makes a situation feel actually even more kind of out of place or more serious, if you like, is up until this point, Moses has been able to do the three miles up Sinai and come into God's presence.

[3 : 50] He's been able to come up the mountain and come down again and get the Ten Commandments and come down again. Now, all of a sudden, he can't come in. If you like, the mediator, the intercessor for God's people, he can't come in.

Now, kids or children, when they say to their brother and sister or their parents that they can't come in, they probably don't have a good reason for it. But God does.

God does. Why can't Moses come in? Why can't we come in? Because God is holy and we are not. Because God is holy and we are not.

In fact, what did we hear right at the beginning? God isn't just holy, but he's holy, holy, holy. He's thrice holy, perfectly holy. And we are not. And that's been true.

That's been going on since Genesis 3, hasn't it? A long time, just after the start of the Bible. Adam and Eve are in Eden, in the garden with God.

[4 : 52] God and his people dwelling together with God's presence there. But they sin. They turn against God and they're put outside, east of Eden. Do you remember?

Angels are put by the entrance, flaming swords. You can't come in. We have a children's book at home. I think it's called something like the garden to the cross or something.

And it has this line that's always stuck in my head from that point in Genesis. But because of their sin, they can't come in. Because of their sin, they can't come in.

They're not holy. They can't come into God's presence and live. And all these hundreds of years later with Moses, he isn't holy. He can't come back into the presence of God.

This time, of course, not at Eden. But the tent of meeting is kind of like an Eden 2.0. It's reconstituted Eden. If we'd gone through all those chapters at the end of Exodus, the tent of meeting is kind of designed and formed and shaped after Eden.

[5 : 54] It's to represent it. It's to show a place where God can meet with his people. And so, friends, the question of the book of Exodus, if you like, is this.

The question for the book of Leviticus really is this. Is how can the tent of meeting become a tent of meeting again? Or really, to put it another way, the question is this. How can a holy God dwell with unholy people?

Or how can unholy people come to dwell with a holy God again? How can we come in? And I hope that's a helpful question as we come to Leviticus.

I hope that's a helpful question for you. Because I think Leviticus does feel like a different world. Lots of animals dying. As you read on, lots of laws on clothing and bodily fluids and lots of speaking about blood.

People are inside the camp, outside the camp. There's so much going on. It's hard. I don't know what your experience is, but my experience is you often get to Leviticus in a kind of year-long Bible reading plan.

[7 : 07] And it's about Leviticus and it's about March sort of time. And it's the time that it often can come screeching to halt. We just about know enough of Genesis. We can get through, yes, okay, there's Eden and there's the flood narrative and Babel.

And we're kind of waiting for Joseph and his technicoloured coat. And okay, they're into Exodus and out. And it's hard at the tent of meeting. But Leviticus, oh.

So what's our way into Leviticus? What God is teaching and showing his people and the question he's trying to answer.

How can a holy God come to dwell in the midst of unholy people again? That's the kind of metronome that's ticking through the whole book.

In fact, it's the kind of metronome that's ticking through the whole Bible. How can we come to dwell with God again? Now the answer to that, that we know this side of Calvary, this side of the New Testament, the answer to that is in Jesus.

[8 : 11] Unholy people can only be made holy now in Christ. In Christ, we can only come to God through Jesus. So why Leviticus then?

Why Leviticus? It's a little bit like taking the diamond, taking Christ, seeing all that he's done, and just allowing it to be twisted. Someone said that in our staff meeting and it was a great way of putting it.

It's seeing the full work of Christ for our salvation and just coming to twist the diamond, to see and look at different angles on all that Christ has done for us.

And that's what we can see here and begin to explore in Leviticus. So how can we come near to God? How can we come near to God? Well, what does chapter one teach us?

It begins to teach us these principles of how we can come near. Chapter one teaches us this. We can come by God's gracious invitation only through the costly sacrifice of a perfect substitute who makes atonement for our sins.

[9 : 14] It's a long sentence. I'll read it again. How can we come? Only by God's gracious invitation, only through a costly sacrifice of a perfect substitute who makes atonement for our sins.

That is the sermon in a sentence. That's the kind of lesson from Leviticus 1. And rather having sub points, really, although there might be a few at the end, we're just going to walk through that sentence for the rest of our time together.

So how can we come near to God? Well, firstly, only by God's gracious invitation. Only by God's gracious invitation.

Leviticus 1 verse 1. The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting. The Lord called Moses from the tent of meeting.

So you see, this estrangement, this distance, this chasm and cave of sin and unholiness, which Moses has, this disease of sin is so pervasive, it cannot be bridged or traveled across by Moses or any mere man.

[10 : 25] We can't do it. We need God's gracious call and invitation. I had a friend in secondary school, the academy in Edinburgh, and we don't call it the academy in Edinburgh, it's high school in Edinburgh, it's academy in the northeast.

I had a friend at school whose dad was a government minister. And just towards the end of our time in secondary school, his dad took a job, which meant a change of address, a change of address to number 11 Downing Street.

And at that time, some of the group of our friends, not me, but some of the other group of friends would go and visit our friends down in Downing Street.

Now, can you just normally, could any one of us, now maybe there's, I don't know all of you here, maybe there's some people seated in this room that can do this, but not many people. It's a very small group of people that can turn up to Downing Street and get in.

Can I just turn up to Downing Street and get in? No. Can I force my way into Downing Street? That would not be a good idea. Can I try and talk my way into Downing Street?

[11 : 36] No, it's not a good idea, right? You can't get in. But what about if I'm with him? What about if I was with my friend?

Oh, he lives here. Yeah, sure. In you go. You see, you've got to be invited. You've got to be with the right person. Oh, you're with him.

Then you can come in. You see, these opening words of Leviticus, it's not just hello, the Lord called to Moses. It's not just a casual greeting. This is the kind of phrase that's used in Leviticus 3, sorry, in Exodus 3, or is used at the burning bush, or in Exodus 19 when they come to the mountain at Sinai.

It's a gracious summoning, a gracious summoning of God to Moses, like a king or a president calling somebody into their presence.

It can only come one way. God is making a way for us to come near. So the very first words of the book, the very first words just remind us of the grace of God.

[12 : 43] We know God because he called us. We know God because he made himself known to us. We know God because even in our sin and unholiness, he said, I want to find you and rescue you and come near to you and dwell among you again.

There's a wonderful hymn by someone called Emmanuel Sibamana. And here's the first few lines of the hymn. Oh, how the grace of God amazes me.

It loosed me from my bonds and set me free. What made it happen so? His own will. This much I know.

His own will. This much I know. What made it happen? His will. His love. His goodness. And so as we prepare to gather in worship tomorrow, and as we prepare to draw near to the table tomorrow, dear friends, remember and revel in and rejoice in the grace of God, the grace of God who sent the Lord Jesus, who called us to Christ so that we could draw near to him.

And friends, this is one of the things that actually sets God and the worship of God here of Israel apart from the nations around them. You see, all the nations around Israel here have systems of sacrifice as well.

[14 : 18] So what's the difference? Well, there's lots. But what's happening in the nations is they're needing to offer sacrifices to try and please God, to offer enough to get the gods to listen to them.

If we just offer more and we just do it better, then God will listen to us. But the gospel is always on the flip of that, turned on its head. No, God has found us.

God has drawn near to us. Our worship and sacrifices is in response to his gracious and glorious invitation because of his love.

So how can we come near to God? By God's gracious invitation. And then what do we see next? Well, only through a costly sacrifice. Only through a costly sacrifice.

Leviticus 1 verse 2. God says, So part of the answer of how we can come near to God in the first five chapters of Leviticus is through sacrifice.

[15 : 29] Sacrifice. We learn we need a sacrifice. Now, later chapters, we're going to learn we need other things. Like we need a priest to bring it. We see that in this chapter, but it's kind of stress later on.

But we're learning we need a sacrifice. And so Leviticus is giving us this grammar. I know we don't all love grammar so much, but it's important that we once saw a grammar book that our kids found hilarious.

And the book was called something like, Let's Eat Gran. And if you can sort of picture the sentence in your mind, Let's Eat Gran. Gran. There's a comma there that could save Gran's life.

Because if it's just Let's Eat Gran, well, we're going to be eating Gran for dinner. But if it's Let's Eat, Gran, well, then we're joining Gran for dinner, right? Grammar is important. And Leviticus is giving us that grammar.

It's giving us that grammar to understand what's going on here. And it's telling us how we need a sacrifice, a sacrifice to come near to God. And the first one here is a sacrifice of burnt offering.

[16 : 33] And we sung, didn't we, in the Psalms earlier on, a lot of the Psalms make mention of these, of these burnt offerings that were offered here. And that's the first one that we have. So verse three, If this offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish, and he shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he might be accepted before the Lord.

So in this burnt offering, they can bring something from the herd. Okay, so a bull, a male without blemish, they can bring that to sacrifice. But not just that, look down to verse 10.

If this gift for a burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or the goat. So you can also bring a sheep or a goat. And verse 14, you can also offer birds, turtle doves or pigeons.

So this first sacrifice that we learn about, this burnt offering, you can bring three different types of animals. So why three? Well, they're based on what people can afford, from the herd, from the flock, or birds.

Obviously, some of these were for the most wealthy, something in the middle, and birds really for the poorest of the poor. Just as a side note, it is interesting in telling that when Jesus comes with his parents and they come to offer sacrifices, they bring birds, birds, the poorest of the poor.

[17 : 58] But it wasn't just the case of, oh, well, we'll just bring the poorest. No, you were to bring the best that you could, the best that you could as you came to worship God. But they've raised these animals, they've got these animals, and they're bringing their very best to worship him.

For all these worshipers, as you offer the burnt offering, if you like, your bank balance is a little lower after this. So they come to God through costly sacrifice.

Now, there's a lot of things that we could draw from that, even as we think of our own worship, and we might do a bit of that tomorrow. But actually, I just want to land here for us.

Here for us. As we come to the table, and as we think through this sacrifice about the Lord Jesus, because that's all it's speaking about, as he comes to fulfill and show us how all this works out.

The point of this is this is costly. Well, dear friends, did the Father spare any expense in sending the Lord Jesus for us? Did the Father spare any expense?

[19 : 05] Was there anything greater in all of heaven and earth that could have been sent in the eternal Son of God? Was there anything more precious? No, no.

In our redemption, the Father truly gave what was most precious and glorious and great for our salvation in sending Jesus.

What did we just sing? How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that he should send what? Send his only Son, his only Son, to make a wretch his treasure.

Heaven's joy. The one to whom from all eternity we will praise and worship and bow down. He who is holy, holy, holy, eternally begotten Son of the Father, worthy of all praise and all glory forever and ever.

He came. He came. He's the one who went to Calvary's tree for us. The one whose blood was shed and body was broken for us.

[20 : 13] What a cost. What a cost. What love God has that he lavished on us, that he would send his Son to redeem us, to draw us to him.

So how can we draw near to God? By God's gracious invitation, only through a costly sacrifice, and this is our last point, of a perfect substitute who makes atonement for our sins, of a perfect substitute who makes atonement for our sins.

Verse 3, If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish, and he shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord.

And he shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. Now actually, for the worshiper here, the sacrifice is even more costly because it's perfect, it's spotless, it's without blemish.

Now you might have read through and said, well, that's not mentioned for the birds. But actually, most commentators think it's not mentioned for the birds because they're for the poorest of the poor. They just couldn't afford it.

[21 : 30] But it is to be perfect, spotless, without blemish. In a few weeks' time, in the evenings, we're going to start a series in Malachi.

Start a series in Malachi. And one of the things we're going to see in Malachi, and if you've read it before, you'll know, but we're going to see in Malachi is one of the things that the Lord has against his people is that by the time of Malachi, again, hundreds of years after this, people are not doing this.

They're bringing sacrifices that are full of blemishes. It's the equivalent of us doing this when an offering bag is passed around for an offering in a church.

It's like them saying, let's get the food waste from home. Let's bring the food waste from home. You know the things that you put, that you scrape your plates into after you've eaten a meal, those kind of things.

You've swept up the floor and you put it in the food, you know, food recycling. It's like saying, let's bring that, and when the offering bag goes around, we're going to open our food recycling and pour it in there. That's what we're going to offer to God.

[22 : 31] That's what they do by that time. And so when you see later on in a few weeks when we come to Malachi, that this is what they're not paying attention to, to God's people here. So, but God says, no, no, the sacrifice is a male without blemish, a spotless animal, spotless.

That's why we speak about entrails and insides all being washed out. Why are they doing that? Because it has to be clean, spotless. It must be clean. We need, we need a perfect substitute, a blameless, a spotless substitute.

So let me just, four questions. I said no sub points at the start, but it's not true. They're questions rather than sub points, okay? So let's do this. Four questions. Firstly, well, as we bring the animal, what did they do?

What did they do? What happens to the animal? Okay, what happens to the animal? And then, what's the result? So firstly, firstly, what does the worshiper do to the animal as they bring it?

Well, look at verse four. As they bring it, they lay hands on it. They lay hands on it. Now, this language isn't that of a kind of gentle touch.

[23 : 43] You're not just giving it a kind of nice stroke of a dog as you do when you pass a dog in the park or something. It's not just a nice, gentle kind of pat. No, no, this is a forceful pushing down.

The only illustration I could think of this week is we had a birthday in our house and one of our sons got Playmobil and trying to get the little tires onto the wheels inside, I had to push this whole thing down with all my might to click it in.

That shows you the kind of extent of my handiwork. Some of you here probably work in oil or mechanics or fix things. We have to properly give them effort, right? For me, it's little Playmobil. But you put all your weight on it. Put all your weight on it.

Maybe like a suitcase when you're going on holiday and you're trying to squeeze that last little thing in and you put your knee on the suitcase to say, just squash it all in. Why are they doing that? The point is transfer.

Substitute. It's laying on the animal. The guilt that you have. The sin that you have. What I have is now yours.

[24 : 49] The syntax of sacrifice. The grammar of the gospel. What the Lord Jesus has done and offers to those who don't know him is only ever understood with a knowledge of substitution.

Of substitution. Of substitutionary atonement. Imagine these people bringing their animals to die. They've raised these animals.

They have these animals. They bring them to die. Knowing what? Knowing that as they sacrifice that the animal will die. My death is now yours. My sin is now yours.

My guilt is now yours. There is no coming back to God without a perfect substitute. A perfect substitute.

Either we die for our sin and pay the cost or someone else does. We need another. A perfect other. And his name is Jesus Christ. So, that's our first question.

[25 : 51] What does the worshiper do to the animal as he brings it? He puts his hand on it. Well, what happens to the animal? Well, it dies. It dies. It's offered to God as a sacrifice in the worshiper's place.

We see that pattern all the way through. But let me again just read it from verse 5. He shall kill the bull before the Lord and Aaron's sons, the priests, will bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that's at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

Let me pick it up here. Sorry. Against the tent of meeting. Verse 6. Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces. And the sons of Aaron and the priests shall put fire on the altar and arrange the wood on the fire.

And Aaron's sons, the priests, shall arrange the pieces, the head, the fat on the wood that is on the fire on the altar. But its entrails and the legs he shall wash with water and the priests shall burn all of it on the altar as a burnt offering, a food offering, a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

So it's a sacrifice. A sacrifice of what? Blood and a body. Body and blood. And each time the blood is sprinkled against the altar.

[27 : 03] I said that this is kind of like gospel grammar. So let's do a gospel grammar word, a great Bible word. As the blood is sprayed, it is what? A sacrifice of propitiation.

Propitiation. A wonderful and important Bible word. What does propitiation mean? Well, it's how God becomes pro us. Just take those first three letters and that helps to propitiate.

How God becomes for us. And there must be blood. There must be blood. blood. And when the blood is sprinkled against the altar, then God's justice is satisfied and there is atonement.

There is atonement. But why blood? Why the sacrifice through blood? Well, because as we've just thought a little bit about, because the wages of sin is death.

That's how great our sin is. It brings the curse of death. So either I must die for the cost of my sin or I need another. Blood must be shed.

[28 : 12] And, well, what happens to the body? Well, we won't go through too many of the details there. I think as you read through that, it probably makes a kind of butcher shop seem kind of vegan probably, right? There's just so many like, whoa, this is kind of wild stuff here.

But what happens? The whole body is offered. The whole body is offered. It's all burnt up. Body and blood. Tomorrow morning, Joe will stand here and read the words of Institution of the Lord's Supper.

What will he read? Jesus taking bread and wine. And what does Jesus say of the bread? My body. What does he say of the wine?

It's my blood. Body and blood offered by a perfect substitute in our place that we might know God, that we might live, who we deserve to die.

So what does the worshiper do? Lay hands on it. What happens to the animal? It dies. Okay, and then the next thing is, well then, when does this happen? I want us to very briefly answer the question of when does it happen?

[29 : 19] When are these sacrifices offered? They can actually be offered on different occasions. We don't have time to read about them all, but they can be offered on different occasions. They can be offered on holy days.

Holy days. They can be offered after uncleanness, after uncleanness, but they can be also offered morning and evening sacrifices. If you turn to chapter 6, just flick on a few pages to chapter 6, and we'll think about this one.

Chapter 6 and verse 8, we get more instructions about these sacrifices there, and you'll see we're coming to the burnt offering. Chapter 6, verse 8, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, command Aaron and his son, saying, this is the law of the burnt offering.

The burnt offering shall be on the hearth on the altar all night until morning, and the fire of the altar shall be kept burning on it. And skip to verse 12. The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it.

It shall not go out. The priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and he shall arrange the burnt offering on it, and he shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually.

[30 : 30] It shall not go out. So can you just kind of imagine for a minute living in a community and in a society where this is happening all the time?

When you wake up in the morning all through the day, and when you go to bed at night, there is a priest who is up keeping the fires going, that these sacrifices are still being offered 24 hours a day.

What is the point? What is the point? It reminds Israel, God's people, that their whole worldview is taken up, that they are not holy and that God is, that they are sinners, that God is pure, that they need a sacrifice.

There's constant, just imagine it, constant bleating, constant blood, constant smell of fire and wood. God is holy, I am not, I need a saviour to live, I need a sacrifice to live, if I want to live, another has to die in my place.

And so can you imagine what it was like, 1400 years after this, there's a man dressed in kind of strange camel fur, eating locusts and honey, and he points to a relative of his, and he says, behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world, the world.

[31 : 59] Not just another substitute, the substitute, not just another offering, the offering, not just a sacrifice that needs repeated again and again, but one great, complete sacrifice for sin.

We learn in the book of Hebrews, don't we, that it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin, but there is a once and for all perfect Lamb, perfect substitute, God clothed in human flesh, the Lord Jesus who gave his life as a ransom for many.

So lastly, our final point as we finish, what's the result? What's the result? The very end of verse four, and it shall be accepted to make atonement for him. That's the result, atonement, at-one-ment, at-one-ment.

The English word was coined by William Tyndale, another person I like reading biographies about, and it means at-one-ment, the sin is covered, it's atoned for. Estrangement is not over anymore, we're together, together.

And what's the result of that? Well, look at the very end of verse nine, and then the very end of verse thirteen, and the very end of verse seventeen, there's this repeated phrase, and it's a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

[33 : 24] These sacrifices, all three of them, a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Smells are evocative, aren't they? I love the smells of barbecue. I also have a very strange thing where I love the smell of sun cream, it really reminds me of being at the beach house, sun cream, or embrace a lair or something, I'm like, that is so good.

Well, these smells, the smells of these sacrifices, is a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Why? Sin has been dealt with. We can dwell together, you are clean.

And as already we have thought about and glory in, it is Christ who perfectly does this for us. If you have time later, read Ephesians one and two. Ephesians one and two, Paul writes that Christ gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice.

The language is this language, that Christ is this sacrifice perfectly for us, a costly, perfect sacrifice, a substitute who on Calvary's tree at the cross would die and offer his blood and his body that we might live.

Christ is the fragrant offering, a pleasing aroma before the Lord that our sin is forgiven and that we can come to our heavenly Father. He is the spotless Lamb, takes away the sin of the world.

[34 : 41] So dear friends, as we close, my question is, have you trusted him? Have you trusted him? Have you come near to him? There is a way to dwell with God, to come near to him and his name is the Lord Jesus.

If you haven't trusted him, come to him and he will deal with your sin and you will know God forever. But if you have, if you know him, then this evening I pray you will rejoice in all that Christ has done.

You will look to the cross, rejoice you have one who is fully forever made you clean and that you will delight to call him your saviour both this night and forevermore.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are our perfect spotless sacrifice.

The one who takes away our sin and washes us clean. You have dipped us in the fountain of your blood that we can be clean. Lord, we're so undeserving.

[35 : 42] We did nothing to merit it, but out of your sheer grace you've come to us and in that we rejoice. May the Lord Jesus ever be before our eyes and our hearts as we give thanks and rejoice and glory in all that he has done for us.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.