

Reading Hebrews - Atonement Part 2
Pentecost +25
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One of the ways to understand atonement might be to just think about stories. Many stories follow the form of Home, Away, and Home Again. For instance, *The Hobbit* is the story of Bilbo Baggins who starts out at home. He's in the shire. He's called on a journey and he goes away and then at the end of the story, he returns. That's the classic three-act structure of the story: home, away, home again, which is also the structure of much musical composition as well. The home, away, home again pattern.

We see that everywhere: *Wizard of Oz* - Dorothy's at home, the storm comes closer into Kansas or blows her into Oz. She tries to get back to Kansas and the end of the story she comes back home.

Chronicles of Narnia. Not only does each novel follow the pattern, but the whole novel series follows the pattern and in the last battle they return, and this is actually probably even a better understanding of how home again works. In the last battle, they come for, he doesn't use the word "heaven" but heaven, so it's very much like home, but it's not exactly home. It's even better than home. And truly in the biblical sense of home again, it is returning home, but returning actually to a different home. The home that I always long for.

So you see it all through the Bible. This pattern is going on all through the Bible. And the one that we would all remember is the Prodigal Son. He starts out at home, he demands his father's inheritance which is essentially publicly wishing for his father's death, and he takes the money, goes to the far country, he squanders it and the way the story quotes the narrative he becomes less than human. He has lost completely his Jewish identity and he's lost all his dignity.

So then, he gets this clever idea that he can negotiate his way to get back home and he might become a servant, but we know the story. He actually never becomes a servant. The father makes him a son again. In a sense, it's like a resurrection from the dead and immediately holds a feast. So he's come home, but he's come home to even a different home than he knew before.

This pattern can be found through the Bible. Start out with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in communion with the Creator. The Lord walks with them in the cool of the evening, but then much like the Prodigal Son, they demand a form of inheritance. The serpent seduces them and they demand knowledge. They try to take what is not given to them and they go into exile. And once again, much like the Prodigal Son, they become dehumanized. In fact, the whole Bible is the story of the dehumanization of people as they are exiled from the presence of the Creator. And so it's broken relation and it's also filled with all sorts of stories of people trying to negotiate their way back into the presence, but the only way they can come back into the presence is by the provision of the Creator. And then finally by the time we get to the end of the Bible, we all come

home to the New Jerusalem, so a different home than Eden, and yet it's even more Eden than Eden was, so to speak. It is the perfection of the completion of Eden.

That pattern, home, away, home again might help us to think about atonement. So most of the Bible takes place after Eden and this effects the theology, it effects many discussions about God. There's a difficulty in understanding that first when we use the word "God" is even itself is a limiter. We come down to a word that we can put around this Creator, and so it might be better to speak of the Creator or even to speak of the Uncreated One. He anticipates every characteristic and he's not bound by any of them. Even use of terms like all powerful are limited because he is not limited by power. He's on the other side of the concept of power. He's always greater. He is unlike anything in his creation, so there is this incredible divide.

And this is the mystery of the story of Eden. There is this communion between the Uncreated One and his creatures. We that He created us for communion. But once that communion is broken, humans must rely on special times or acts of revelation to hear from Him.

In the Old Testament, we read about all sorts of cultures with spiritual practices that might be called broken forms. The broken forms may possibly be some ancient remembrance from Noah's sons. There are similarities in the rituals in various peoples. I call these rituals broken forms because the actions create a false image of the Creator and likewise, create false images of the people. They result in enslavement, sexual perversion, oppression of the weak, and even human sacrifice (see Romans 1:18-32).

These surrounding religions attempt to manipulate either the Creator or manipulate the demon. Many of the cultures are revolved around demons. Fighting off the demons.

There is also confusion about the creation. Psalm 19 says that the heavens are worshiping the Lord, and yet their voice is misunderstood. Depending on the translation you read, their voice is not actually heard. It goes out, but it can't be understood. So as a result, people began to worship the sun, worship creation. If you follow the logic of Psalm 19, it ends with a call to meditate upon Commandments, the Torah. Because the Torah begins to reorder our understanding of who the Creator is.

Essentially that's the story of this, away from home. Humanity, separated from communication with the Uncreated One turns further and further into corruption and darkness. The Uncreated One chooses to redeem the world through one family: the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is through this family that he will begin to communicate with the world and he will begin to restore the world. And he uses the forms of this world, the broken forms. He uses the rituals that people are already aware of, but he alters how they understand him within those very forms.

The children of Israel become the bearers of the revelation. So we might speak of them as bearing testimony to the Creator. The rest of the world will begin to learn who the Creator is by

looking at the children of Israel, by looking at their forms, their rituals, their law. The will reveal him. They are the testimony or the witness.

The people themselves are literally the witness. The nation is the witness. And so when we speak of the Old Testament, we are speaking of the testimony of the children of Israel. That's what it is. It's the testimony. It is the witness of this family, this singular family of prophets and their failures and their successes and their worship and their false worship. They're continually bearing testimony. They're actually bearing testimony in two ways as to who the Creator is and who humanity is. They bear witness to how broken humanity is. By the time we get to the end of their story, they have so corrupted the laws of God that they have become more evil than their surrounding nations.

I can look at the children of Israel and see how corrupt humanity is and is becoming. Romans one and two tell this story. Israel is always revealing the brokenness of humanity and the mystery of the Uncreated One. In fact, when the Uncreated One speaks to Moses, he gives him an unnameable name. Not even a name can limit the Uncreated One. An unnameable name, and so instead they will use the term "Lord" or "Adonai" which is really just a term or a word that actually has to do with parenting in part.¹ It's used as some kind of ruler, but it's a parent, so parenting. So Father begins to become the revelation of who he is. In the Old Testament, he reveals himself as father and so, many times for the unnameable name they used the word "Adonai" or "Lord." That way they don't even name the unnameable name. They just called him Adonai or Lord.

The unnameable one. The Wholly Other speaks to Israel and he begins to speak to teach them. Specifically, he speaks to Moses. There were several characters that received very specific instructionP Moses being the primary one. That's why Moses in the Book of Hebrews, he bears testimony in a way that no other character in the Bible does. In fact, the tabernacle is treated in the Book of Hebrews in a way that the temple never is. But that he would recognize that the tabernacle was the one that goes after the pattern that God had revealed.

The Lord reveals a way of worshiping in the tabernacle. There are no images. Israel's denied art. They're not a people of images. They're a people of the future word. They're a people of promises instead of images. That's what they live by are promises. They go through the Promised Land. They were promised things. Again and again, all through their story, they're promised things. And if you actually read Deuteronomy, if you read and reread Moses' sermons in Deuteronomy, it's very obvious that he expects them to completely fail and then to go into some form of exile because he keeps predicting it.

He promises in some sense a restoration. In Deuteronomy, we begin to see that the Lord is calling the people to a way of moral living that reflects holiness, which is one of the instinctive things about the Israelite religion is based in morality, their holiness is moral and set apart. Jacob Milgrom, the late rabbi scholar of Leviticus, spent his whole life writing and teaching about Leviticus. He suggests that the surrounding cultures protected their tabernacle by keeping the

demons away. Israel, on the other hand, must protect the Tabernacle from the impurity of the people. The people in one sense are the demons.²

People are the threat. They're the demonic ones. We're the ones who drive away the presence of God. Nothing else drives it away. The tabernacle rituals are focused on purifying the people. You had sacrifices going on continuously which we won't go into this morning, but every one of them are very fascinating. They're all about keeping the communication channel open and one day each year the high priest goes into the Most Holy Place. Only one day a year and the ritual for entering the most holy place was very involved. He literally has to bathe first. Put on a linen robe. He has a series of sacrifices that have to be offered. A bull is offered. He offers a bull for himself and his family in case any of them have sinned and he offers a goat in sacrifice and then he takes and this sounds so odd to us, rather than trying to explain it theologically, just take it as the story goes, he takes the blood of the bull and the goat and he uses it to cleanse the tabernacle. He literally has to sprinkle it all through the tabernacle. (See Leviticus 16)

Then after he's done that there's a second goat. He comes out and puts his hands on the second goat and he imputes or imparts the sins of himself and all the people into that second goat. And that second goat, and that's where we get the term "scapegoat" is driven out into the wilderness where the demons are and it takes the sins out to the demons. So the goat is lead out into the wilderness.

Then, and only then can he enters into the Most Holy Place. He travels through the outer court where all the people offer sacrifices, the inner court where the priests serve, and into the Most Holy Place. Once a year he comes in here to pray. It may not be obvious, but this is the home again. He is traveling back to Eden. That's where he's going. The holy place is back to the unbroken communication with the Creator. So he's traveling to the heavens, to the highest heaven of all which was the Garden of Eden.

So he goes back to the most holy place once a year. Humans are given a vision of the return. He prays for the people and the land that it might remain pure so that the Uncreated One, the Holy Other, the Adonai won't leave. Atonement in this sense was the blood covering of the sins of the people.

The story that the Scripture tells us is that eventually Israel becomes so evil that even this cannot purify their sins, cannot cover their sins. Jerusalem is destroyed and they're put into exile. The day of atonement is over.

I won't get into it now, but when they return from exile, the new year changes. Prior to that the New Year was Passover. If you follow the logic of Scripture, when they returned, the New Year becomes the Day of Atonement and that's what it is today. This is how significant the day of atonement becomes.

The writer of Hebrews is writing with this kind of imagery in mind. Jesus goes into the Most Holy Place. He makes one sacrifice for all. He doesn't have to cleanse for himself because he is holy, and not only does he cleanse our sins, but he cleanses the guilty conscious. He opens access to the Most Holy Place.

In some sense we begin to experience it in some way now, and then there's a promissory note of entering it more fully. The primary image we have for entering into the Most Holy Place is the Eucharist. It is a meal. All through Church history, that's been the image. We are passing through the tabernacle coming into the most holy place. We're coming through the fear. At one time, people were terrified of entering the Presence of the Holy like Isaiah who cries out "I am coming undone." But now in Christ, we come and dine. There's a little icon in the back you can look at from a German iconographer. It's a group of people having a meal with Jesus feeding them. That is the image of coming into the Most Holy Place now.

That's what the writer is trying to communicate. The people have become discouraged because they are holding a promissory note for heaven. They are living in a culture that rejects their faith. The glory hasn't become fully unveiled yet. He's reminding them that they do live in a significant moment because Jesus has led you into the Most Holy Place. And that's how we think of it in the New Testament, the New Covenant.

Not that the Old Covenant was bad. It was that it was always pointing to a second testimony that more fully revealed who this Uncreated One was. The Old Testament gives the revelation of him holy because it's the primary thing we're told and then faithful, trustworthy and then the most common word used is hesed which means mercy, lovingkindness.

He's merciful and kind. Once Jesus comes we find out that he's the communion of love: the Father, the Son and the Spirit. We suddenly hear it seems like this awesome power envelops us and it becomes personal. We can speak of the Spirit personal only because of Jesus. Jesus reveals the Father. Jesus reveals his Spirit. Jesus is the revelation of God.

This image of atonement in Hebrews. Now, with that in mind, let's return to the home, away, and home again story in light of Prodigal Son. Because it's one of the best home, away, and home again stories we have. Everybody knows the story of the Prodigal Son. And many of you are familiar with Kevin Bailey's understanding that brings the Mediterranean view to the story.

The son is going to the father, demanding that and he gives it to him. He is publicly stating his wishes that his father were dead. The whole community would have excommunicated him for dishonoring his father, and he would've been dead to the father and to the community. He would have put the father in a financial hardship to do that. The son goes away, it's like the Adam and Eve story leaving the garden and becoming less human, collectively less humanized.

It's the story of the Gollum in Lord of the Rings. The hobbit who becomes a beast. The Prodigal Son is not repentant when he returns home, he's just trying to negotiate with the father. Going

back, trying to pose as a servant. But for him to return to the father's home in a Mediterranean culture after doing what he did, he would have had to pass through a gauntlet of people cursing him, throwing things at him, maybe hitting him and beating him. This is a formal ritual in the Mediterranean world if you have offended the community. To return, you have to go through some deep humiliation.

Secondly and in that same world, the father, the lord, he doesn't ever do anything but walk slowly. So in the story we see the father lift up his robe and run. Which would be absolutely, once again, humiliation on his part, and he descends through the gauntlet itself, which is the image of Christ coming into the world. That's exactly what the father going to the son before the son can even make the deal. He kisses him and make him a son again. He resurrects from the dead. The story ends in a meal.

Of course, I didn't get into the other son in there either. But for today, we'll focus on the restoration of the son. The father runs to the son in a far country where he's caught in a place of dehumanization, corruption. He runs to us. He grabs us up in his arms. Kisses us. Clothes us and brings us to a meal. And that's one of the greatest pictures of atonement that we could have. For every week when we come forward, we are going through the cosmos into the most holy place anticipating the great communion of the saints. We're all going together and worship as we say every week the angels, archangels and all the company of heaven.

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ See 'adhoṇāi *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 62–63.

² Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 231.