

“Reconciled and restored”

Romans 5:6-11

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Although Paul never mentions the word, I think it is pretty clear he knew a thing or two about goats. From everything we know, Paul was an urban sort of guy. He was familiar with the bustling city of Jerusalem. He strategically chose cities like Caesarea, Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, Athens, and ultimately Rome to set up his tent. So, what evidence do I have to support my claim that Paul knew a thing or two about goats? The simplest piece of evidence I would offer is the letter to the Romans, considered by many to be Paul’s most mature and complete working out of his theology. As we read together in our opening sentences, in a passage from Romans 3, Paul writes that God presented Jesus Christ as a sacrifice of atonement.

With that one phrase, a sacrifice of atonement, Paul has taken us back, way back, way, way back to the book of Leviticus, a book that is smack dab in the middle of the desert wanderings that occupied the forty years after the people of God left Egypt and before they entered the Promised Land. In Leviticus God introduces not only the concept of atonement, but the means for Israel to experience atonement. At the heart of the concept and the means of atonement is none other than a goat. Paul writes about a sacrifice of atonement because Paul knew about the concept and the means of atonement that were enacted for the people of God every year on the Day of Atonement, a day when the central actor was a goat...or actually, two goats.

The Day of Atonement is described in great detail in Leviticus chapter 16. To understand the significance of the Day of Atonement we need to remember that the tabernacle, and later the temple, were constructed so that there was a sacred space known as the Holy of Holies. A curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the tabernacle or temple. The high priest, who at the time of Leviticus was Aaron, the brother of Moses, could enter the Holy of Holies only once a year, on the day of atonement. Aaron was to slaughter one of the goats as a sin offering for the people and take the blood of the goat behind the curtain. There, behind the curtain the high priest would

sprinkle the blood of the goat that had been sacrificed on what is called the atonement cover, the covering of the Ark of the Covenant. The high priest would sprinkle the blood of the sin offering, the blood of the goat, on the atonement cover. In this way the high priest signified that God was making atonement for the sin of the people. That sin offering involving the goat on the Day of Atonement was an offering of atonement. When Paul writes that Jesus was presented as our sacrifice of atonement, it is clear Paul knew a thing or two about goats.

When that whole ceremony was completed behind the curtain, in the Holy of Holies, the high priest would come out from behind the curtain. The sacrifice was completed. But the reality of atonement was not yet complete. Yes, a sacrifice had been made. But something else occurred on the Day of Atonement that sealed the reality in the minds of the people. Remember, there were two goats. One had been sacrificed. What about the remaining goat, the second goat? Aaron was to “lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert...The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place.” (Leviticus 16:20-22)

Sin is serious. Sin attacks the relationship the people have with their God and the relationships they have with one another. Sin breaks those relationships. Sin breaks the relationship we have with God and the relationships we have with one another. God does not ignore sin. God takes sin seriously. God addresses sin. God atones for sin. Yes, the sacrifice of the goat behind the curtain of the Holy of Holies is graphic. Sin brings death, and nothing less than death atones for sin. So that the people clearly understand sin had been dealt with and sin had been atoned, a goat symbolically carried the sin of the people far away into the desert. You can imagine the sigh of relief that would come from a collective people who had received the great gift of atonement. What a huge sigh of relief would rise from the people as they realized atonement was complete.

We must be absolutely clear on this, atonement is complete. When the goats had served their purpose, the blood of one shed on the cover of atonement in the Holy of Holies and the other goat escaping into the

wilderness, carrying the symbolic sins of the people far, far away, atonement was complete. Because Paul understood goats, Paul understood atonement was complete. God presented Christ Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement. Jesus was the complete sacrifice of atonement. We do not add anything to that atonement. Atonement is an act of God. Atonement is a gift of God. Atonement is God's gracious gift. All we do is receive that gift through faith. By grace we have been saved through faith. The righteous live by faith, by believing in the atonement that God has so freely given in Jesus Christ.

And yet when we say atonement is complete, we do not mean that atonement is finished. The goats, the one who was sacrificed and the one who escaped, play out their part of this great drama on the Day of Atonement. That day is not called the Day of Forgiveness, although forgiveness is central to atonement. That great day is called the Day of Atonement. If it was the Day of Forgiveness, after the blood had been sprinkled behind the curtain and the goat had escaped into the wilderness, after the people realized their sins were forgiven by their gracious God, after they had all breathed a huge sigh of relief, then things could get back to normal. Everyone could go back to their old ways. They could wipe their hands of their sins and carry on with their day to day living. If it was the Day of Forgiveness, I guess you could do that. But it is not the Day of Forgiveness. It is the Day of Atonement. Atonement is more than forgiveness. Atonement signals that the forgiveness of sins removes the damage and the destructive power of sin, opening the way for a new pattern of living. If sin breaks the relationship the people have with their God and with one another, atonement restores that relationship, that right relationship with God and with one another.

I hope you can see how atonement is a crucial part of Jubilee. We have looked at Jubilee as a time of restoration, a time of return, a time of renewal, a time when debts are forgiven, a time when slaves are released. We have also looked at how Jubilee is more than a once every fifty-years-experience of renewal and restoration. We have tied Jubilee into the weekly remembrance of Sabbath. Remembering that we...and others are created in the image of God, we commit ourselves to working toward a world where all people experience the inalienable right of belonging. Remembering that we...and others were enslaved by powers of oppression, treated ruthlessly, beaten down and broken, only to be rescued by the God who sees our

suffering, hears our cries of pain, is concerned and comes to help, we commit ourselves to being a people who see the suffering of others, who hear their cries, who show concern, and who come to help. Now to the Sabbath remembrance and observance we add the Day of Atonement. We whose sins have been covered by God, whose sins have been carried away, we commit ourselves to responding to that great gift of forgiveness by showing mercy and forgiveness and working for reconciliation in a world ruled by broken relationships.

That might make sense, but as nice as linking atonement to Jubilee is, what evidence can we find that Jubilee and atonement are linked together? Listen again to the instructions given to the people of God regarding the commencement of the Year of Jubilee. “Count off seven Sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land.” (Leviticus 25:8,9)

Jubilee, and the practices associated with Jubilee, practices like hospitality, like welcoming others, like seeking justice, like being my brother’s keeper, like loving my neighbor, like leaving some grain at the edge of the field so someone in need can glean and get a little food so they survive, and showing concern and compassion for the ones who are vulnerable, for strangers and aliens and foreigners, for widows and orphans, for the poor, the lonely, the suffering, the grieving, the outsiders, the hurting and the helpless, are all practices that make atonement more than forgiveness of sins. Practices that truly show love for others bring integrity to atonement. We do not wash our hands of our sins and say that atonement is done. God washes our hands and then puts a towel in our hands and says, “Love others...as I have loved you.”

Although he never mentions the word, I think it is pretty clear that Paul knew a thing or two about goats. Paul knew about atonement. Paul knew about forgiveness, that is for sure. But more than simply being forgiven, Paul understood the fullness of atonement. For Paul the process of atonement never ended with forgiveness. Forgiveness was a catalyst to new living.

In Romans 3 Paul writes that God presented Christ Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement. He follows up on that in our passage today from Romans 5, telling us that at just the right time, when we were powerless, when we were still sinners, Christ died for us, for sinners, for the ungodly. Not content just to let us know Christ died for us, Paul emphasizes that “God proves his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) But that incredible act of love, that sacrifice of atonement that brings forgiveness of sins, is not the end for Paul. It is a beginning. A new beginning. So we come to Romans 12 and the apostle writes, “Therefore, I urge you, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” (Romans 12:1) How do we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice? The practices we have explored with Jubilee are a great place to start. Welcome the stranger and alien. Be hospitable. Open your heart...open your life to others. Be a person who works for reconciliation in our world, a person who works for justice. Practice forgiveness.

In studying the Jubilee, I came across something from a commentator named Jacob Milgrom. Reviewing the numerous instructions surrounding the Jubilee, Milgrom notes that despite all the commands for how the people are to celebrate Jubilee, there are no sanctions. God spells out all the wonderful ways to practice the inalienable right of belonging, bold and beautiful means of building and preserving community, but there are no sanctions in the Jubilee. There is no threat of punishment, no, “Do this or else...” If there is no threat of punishment for failing to observe the Jubilee, if there are no sanctions for those who disregard the calls to release and return and forgive, then what would motivate the people to observe the Jubilee. Here Milgrom makes a profound statement. “Obedience must be elicited by appeal to the theological and moral sensibilities of the community.”<sup>1</sup>

What stronger theological and moral appeal could there be than to start Jubilee on the Day of Atonement? As our sins are carried away, covered, removed, atoned, the amazing and awesome gift of forgiveness is not finished. We who have experienced atonement, a complete and total reconciliation with our God, what a perfect time to answer the trumpet call

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Continental Commentary*, p. 308.

for Jubilee. Indeed, as Paul writes, “In view of God’s mercy, offer your life as a living sacrifice.”

Stories of atonement are powerful. They can stir within us a response that is loving, generous, and even sacrificial. We have known a young woman from her days in elementary and middle school, through high school, college, graduation, and now as a young adult. When she finished college, she was so glad not to have to read books that were assigned to her, she solicited books that others recommended for their entertainment and edification. One of the books she read and then recommended in turn to others was David Copperfield. No, not that David Copperfield, the magician. The David Copperfield that was written so long ago by Charles Dickens. She spoke so highly of David Copperfield, I dug through a volume of works by Dickens and I read the book upon whose completion the famed author wrote, “I regret the separation from my many companions.” Dickens had fallen in love with the characters. So did I.

In particular, there is a man whom young David Copperfield meets by the name of Mr. Peggotty. Mr. Peggotty lives in a simple fisherman’s house. Mr. Peggotty is truly a salt of the earth type person. Mr. Peggotty has a young niece whom he has adopted and cared for since she was left alone at a young age. This niece, Emily, is the apple of his eye. Now Emily is just about to be married, to a simple fellow that has worked side by side with Mr. Peggotty for many years. On the eve of their marriage, Mr. Peggotty is waiting for Emily to come home and have a final goodbye before she enters into this happy marriage. As Peggotty waits for this final visit before she leaves his house to make her own home, Mr. Peggotty gets sentimental. He picks up different household items and each one holds a memory of Emily. Finally, he comes to a lamp. Emily has worked a few miles from the house for many years, and Mr. Peggotty remembers that each night he would light the lamp, so that as she came home in the dark, she would know he was there, waiting to welcome her. And Mr. Peggotty says that even after she is married and moves away, he’ll keep the lamp burning, he’ll leave the light on, in case she ever needs to return home.

That night something terrible happens that threatens to ruin the sweetness of Peggotty’s love for his niece Emily. A villain appears who has

secretly wooed Emily. This villain has turned her heart away from the simple young man to whom she was engaged. On that very night, the night she was supposed to marry the simple and genuine man, she instead leaves with the villain and they go across the sea. When Mr. Peggotty hears this devastating news of his precious niece turning her back on all the family holds dear, Peggotty's heart breaks. So did mine.

At this point I'm literally holding my breath to see how Mr. Peggotty will handle this devastating disappointment. The way he handles it, is every bit as meaningful as that beautiful image of leaving the lamp on. Mr. Peggotty leaves the comfort of his little home, and he sets off on a quest to find Emily, the niece who caused such deep pain to all. But his going to find her isn't all he does. He also instructs that a widow who lives with him stay in his house, even though he is leaving. And his instructions are simple and clear. Keep the lamp burning. In case she ever comes home, keep the lamp burning.

That story captures the best of atonement, the atonement we find in our Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus leaves the comfort and safety of heaven and comes to earth to search for us, to seek and to save the lost. In that seeking and that saving, he offers his life as a sacrifice of atonement. And at the same time, the Father in heaven, our Father in heaven, keeps the light on at home, he keeps the lamp burning, a constant invitation to his dear children to come home, to come home.

Atonement provides the appeal to us that says as we have received this unfathomable love from God, this unconditional love from God, the God who gave his life for us, how can we simply receive the gift of forgiveness and stop there? No. The Day of Atonement, the act of atonement, the sacrifice of atonement that Jesus provided for us, that act sounds the trumpet and signals the call for Jubilee. God proves his love for us. How can we respond with anything less than offering ourselves to God as a living sacrifice? Or in the words of one of the most cherished hymns of the Christian faith:

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died  
My richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride

Forbid it Lord that I should boast save in the death of Christ my God  
All the vain things that charm me most I sacrifice them to his blood

See from his head his hands his feet sorrow and love flow mingled down  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet or thorns compose so rich a crown

Were the whole realm of nature mine that were a present far too small  
Love so amazing so divine demands my soul my life my all  
(Isaac Watts)