

“Do You Want God to Be Near to You?”

Kevin Watkins

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Pastor Amy rightly said last week, “God has never been interested in a long-distance relationship. All of history has been the story of God moving closer and closer and closer.” Which was and is great news, except what if you do not want a close relationship with God? What if you only want to have a long-distance relationship with God?

It has been a year since the people of Israel left Egypt. They are camped at Mount Sinai. And they are afraid of God. Remember, the people of Israel had been slaves for generations. All they know about God is that he is unbelievably powerful. They saw God defeat the gods of the Egyptians with the plagues and even defeat Pharaoh himself. God can relocate water, multiply animals, and take the lives of his enemies.

And now God was there on the mountain in front of them and they were terrified. Exodus 20:18-21 says,

*18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance 19 and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”*

*20 Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”*

*21 The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.*

God was not safe. They wanted a longer distance relationship. So Moses spoke for them, and ultimately, God gave Aaron and his sons as priests. Their role was to go between God and the people.

As the priests began their work, all the people were gathered together in front of the tabernacle and *“the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. 24 Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown.”*

There was still fear, but there was also joy.

Until, the next verse, “Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. 2 So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.”

Oh no. The priests were supposed to make it safe for the people to live with God and they died. They misused their role as priests, did not listen to God, and offered sacrifices contrary to God’s command. They sinned and it cost them their lives. What now?

If priests are not safe in God’s presence, what does that mean for the rest of us? Sure God is moving closer and closer, but what if I do not want God to be near to me?

And I want to pause here and ask, “Do you want God to be near to you?”

At first blush, this question seems so simple to answer for many of us, the answer is, "Of course." But if you will pause with me here for a minute, just stay right here and consider honestly, do you want God physically present with you every moment of every day?

I want God with me in moments like right now, when I am trying to put into words things that are beyond me. I really want God with me. But what when I want to gossip? Or lie? Or talk bad about that person who hurt my feelings last week?

What about when you want to curse at other drivers on the road? When you want to engage in lust or you want to go shopping for things you don't need to make yourself feel better? What about when we want to give into our ego's need for self-promotion and draw attention to ourselves in conversation or on instagram?

Do I want to live with God? Honestly sometimes I would prefer Him not be here so I can sin. And I know that is true, because I keep sinning. At some level, I love my sin, you love your sin. We want our sin more than we want to be with God. Our sin gets in the way of our life with God. In this way, we are like Israel, we do not want God to be physically present. We want license, the ability to say and do what we want.

Israel for their part was just afraid. And Israel was living in this place of fear when our story picks up in Lev. 16. We read vv.20-34 for time's sake, but today's story starts back at the beginning of the chapter this way.

The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord. 2 The Lord said to Moses: "Tell your brother Aaron that he is 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 he will die. For I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover.

Aaron is not free to come into God's presence whenever He wants. No one was allowed to come into God's presence whenever they wanted. God is not like anyone or anything else. We did not make Him, nor can we control what He does or how we relate to Him. God is God and we are not. Our only choice is to relate to God in the ways that He makes possible. We only get to be with God on his terms. He makes the rules.

All week, I kept thinking about the power of God. By way of analogy, the sun at its core is 27 million degrees. I read an article that said that the closest a person could get to the sun with our current space suit technology is to within 3 million miles of the sun. Any closer than 3 million miles and the suit would melt and we would burn up. The sun will melt your face off hot from 3 million miles away.

That is a little like what God is like. Deuteronomy 4:24 calls the Lord, "a consuming fire." God is moving closer and closer, but how close can we get to God and live? In Exodus 33, God Himself said, "No one can see my face and live."

And, it is not that we can't get too close because He is hot like the sun. We cannot get close to God because He is an all-powerful force for love and goodness. God has all the power over all creation and He has a beautiful vision for mankind and He is working toward that end.

God is very serious about this. Mankind, human beings were made to be good, in every possible way. And whenever people put themselves against God's designs, they are in danger of an all-consuming fire. Scripture is clear, do not put yourself against the strong love of God, it will not go well. As C.S. Lewis

once said, "You can't go against the grain of the universe and not expect to get splinters." Don't act against God and His purposes in the world. There will be splinters. And because of Aaron's sins, the sins of his family, and the people of Israel, it was not safe to be in God's presence.

But again God makes a way for Israel to be with Him. Sins can be forgiven. God makes a way.

*3 "This is how Aaron is to enter the Most Holy Place: He must first bring a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. 4 He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments; so he must bathe himself with water before he puts them on.*

Animal sacrifice is so strange to us in 2023, but it was a normal part of their cultural environment. It is like having a cell phone or wearing flannel in the fall. Everyone does it. Every culture had local gods and each culture sacrificed animals to their gods, so the Lord God used animal sacrifice as a means for His purposes. The reasons for Israel's sacrifices were to say thank you to God and to cleanse them from their sins and make atonement.

Atonement is a significant word in Leviticus. Atonement means what it sounds like, at-one-ment. Atonement means to bring together two parties that have been separated. The Hebrew word for atonement is kaphar. And it originally meant something like to cover your face with a present. To offer something in order for the relationship to be restored.

In the case of animal sacrifice, the gift that is offered for atonement is the life of an animal. When people sin, when we sin, we go against God's character, against the grain of the universe, we make God our enemy, and we forfeit our lives. But God in his grace, made a way for atonement, a life for a life. The life of an animal offered in place of the life of a sinner, through the sprinkling of the blood.

When thinking of blood in the sacrifice, think not of death but of life. Life is in the blood. Over and over again things are sprinkled with blood, the blood is the means of life in a body. A life exchange. Death for death. Life for life.

In animal sacrifice, God was making a way for us to be with Him. And in Leviticus 16, God outlines a day of sacrifices that will bring atonement between Him and Israel.

And He starts with Aaron. God tells Aaron to humble himself. Aaron as high priest was given beautiful robes of blue, purple, and scarlet woven together with gold and row after row of precious stones. Aaron was normally dressed like a king, but not today, not on the day of atonement.

Aaron, instead, was to humble himself and put on plain robes. In the eyes of God, Aaron was like everyone else. Sinful and unclean. And he serves the people as a humble servant. Aaron was to offer a bull as sacrifice to make atone for him and his household. His family had sinned and God didn't ignore that and Aaron couldn't forget it. But God made a way for forgiveness.

As an aside, it is important to acknowledge that even our most important spiritual leaders sin. Their families sin. In my case, it is my calling from God and from you as a church to be one of your pastors. It is my privilege and the other pastors' privilege to lead you in worship, to teach you the bible, and to try to live in such a way that we can say with the Apostle Paul, "Follow me as I follow Jesus." That is what we are trying to do and yet we sin. We get angry and cynical. We have, I have ego and unhealthy pride. This

felt important for me to say. When you think of us, your pastors, I hope you will think well of us and I hope you will also remember that we too have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God.

Back to the story

*14 He is to take some of the bull's blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover; then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover.*

At the center of the tabernacle, behind a curtain is the Most holy place where the ark of the covenant was kept. And the language of scripture talks about the heavens as being God's throne room and the ark being his footstool on earth. Aaron brings the blood and sprinkles the blood on the ark 7 times. 7 being the number of completeness in the bible. It is symbolic. The full life of the animal is offered to God. Sin is not a small problem, a minor character flaw in otherwise good people. It is death. Aaron was, Israel was dead in their sin and what was needed was life. And God chose to accept a life in the place of another life.

A full life in exchange for Aaron's full life. Aaron and his family were now really forgiven. God had made a way. Now having been restored to God, Aaron was to offer sacrifices on behalf of Israel.

*Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting. 8 He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. 9 Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. 10 But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.*

This is so interesting. One goat was to be killed as a normal sin offering, but the other goat was to do something else.

First the sin offering,

*15 "He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull's blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. 16 In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the tent of meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness.*

Notice, the sin of Israel had polluted everything. Aaron sprinkles blood, sprinkles life on the Most Holy Place because it has been defiled by the sin of the community. There is no place on earth, even our most holy places that have not been polluted by sin. Sin is not just private, it is communal and it infects everything. This text uses 4 different words for the evil of the people: sin, wickedness, rebellion, and uncleanness.

And whatever you call it, it has made the holiest place on earth dirty and dead. Just like priests and pastors need to be forgiven and receive life, so too do our churches and small groups and families need to be atoned for. Sin is death and it has infected everything. Then,

*"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. 21 He is 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 wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. 22 The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness.*

The second half of this sacrifice is unlike any other. Aaron lays his hands on the goat and confesses over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites, all their sins and puts that on the goat's head, symbolically.

Imagine that, if we were to begin to confess the sins of everyone in this room and then everyone in Hickory and then for our whole nation. Think about the weight of that. There is weight to sin and we will often carry that around with us. Are there sins that weigh heavy on you?

All of that is placed on this goat and then it is led out of the city and it is a physical sign that the sin of the people and the weight of the sin, the blame and the guilt have been carried away. God is no longer counting their sins against them. As the Psalmist would later write in Psalm 103 *"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."*

Their sin was really forgiven. God had made a way for Israel to live with Him.

Our passage ends with

*29 "This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves[c] and not do any work—whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you— 30 because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. 31 It is a day of sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance... 34 "This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites." And it was done, as the Lord commanded Moses.*

On this day, now called Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement, no one worked and no one ate. The only thing done on that day was done by God and Aaron. On that day, every Israelite was to stop, to remember their sin, and whenever they felt physical hunger they were reminded of their need for God's loving kindness. On that Day sacrifices for all of their sins were offered that they might be restored to God. And for a year, Israel's sins were forgiven and they had atonement with God.

And that was a lasting ordinance, until one day. There came a greater high priest than Aaron, one who did not have to offer sacrifices for himself, because he was without sin. And just like Israel rested and did not have a role in their atonement, but to receive it and respond in gratitude, Jesus came and did the work of our atonement all by himself.

As Aaron took off his royal garments and put on humble robes, Jesus, God, humbled himself and made himself a servant. And not only was he a better Aaron, he was a more perfect sacrifice.

Jesus is like the goat who gave up his life, whose blood was offered as a sacrifice for the sins of His people. Hebrews 9 says it this way

*13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*

Jesus is the perfect sin offering and Jesus is the scapegoat for us. All the guilt of all the sin of all time was put upon Jesus and he bore them outside the city where He died bearing the weight of our sin.

Jesus offered his blood on behalf of our sin. He died in our place. His death instead of ours. His life now gives us life. Because of Jesus' work on the cross, our sins really are forgiven. We can be one again with God, not just for a year, but forever. We can live with God because of Jesus' atoning work.

God has made a way.

A few small invitations this week to make this more real to us.

First, spend some time with the question, "Do I want to be with God?" The Israelites did not. Of course, they wanted to be protected from their enemies, but they wanted a long distance relationship with God. How close do you want God to be? What gets in the way of you wanting God around all the time?

That question leads to the next invitation which is pray Psalm 139:23-24

*Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. 24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.* Remember, if God is with us, He will work to get rid of the sin in our lives. There are sins we don't know about that need to be repented of, that need to be forgiven. I confess that most days I go through my normal days without strong feelings of guilt over sin. I think a lot of that is a healthy acceptance of forgiveness, but also there are sins in my life that I am blind to.

That leads to the third invitation. Practice confession. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Confess to God the sins that you know about and receive his forgiveness. And if I can add this challenge, confess your sin to God and one other person. James 5:16 says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." There is something powerful about confessing your sins to a trustworthy friend or family member that leads to healing. Try it and see.

Then finally, I couldn't help but feel enormously grateful this week for Jesus. Jesus and his work on the cross have offered the once and for all perfect sacrifice on our behalf. We do not have to live in fear of God. Not because God is less powerful or less committed to goodness, but because Jesus has made a way. Forgiveness is real. Thank you Jesus.

Please pray with me.