

Atonement
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Leviticus 16:1-10, 29-30

There is a famous quote from the 1970 movie “Love Story”: “*Love means never having to say you're sorry.*” What may have been the good intentions of that statement from Ali MacGraw’s character to her boyfriend? What is the basic flaw in the quote? If we put that quote in the context of following Christ, how is it heresy?

Today’s text gives us an account of the first “Day of Atonement” for God’s people Israel. Jews today still observe that day of atonement known as Yom Kippur. This holiest day on the Jewish calendar is all about repentance and asking for forgiveness.ⁱ

That first day of atonement in this text points to what Jesus accomplished by His death on the cross so sinful mankind can be reconciled to our Holy God and forgiven for our sins. Do you think repentance has fallen out of favor in many modern churches? Why?

Trusting Christ as Savior starts with being sorry for our sin and turning from it (repentance). When we are saved our sins are forgiven for all time, but regular repentance in our relationship with Jesus as Lord allows us to experience the JOY of forgiveness.

The point: Repentance for sin and God’s gift of grace are not opposing ideas, they go hand in hand. Godly sorrow for our sin leads to repentance and a deeper relationship with Jesus. In other words, saying we are sorry is evidence that we love the Lord.

Let’s go back in time to the first Day of Atonement for Israel.

(NLT) — **1** The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron’s two sons, who died after they entered the Lord’s presence and burned the wrong kind of fire before him. **2** The Lord said to Moses, “Warn your brother, Aaron, not to enter the Most Holy Place behind the inner curtain whenever he chooses; if he does, he will die. For the Ark’s cover—the place of atonement—is there, and I myself am present in the cloud above the atonement cover. **3** “When Aaron enters the sanctuary area, he must follow these instructions fully. He must bring a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. **4** He must put on his linen tunic and the linen undergarments worn next to his body. He must tie the linen sash around his waist and put the linen turban on his head. These are sacred garments, so he must bathe himself in water before he puts them on. **5** Aaron must take from the community of Israel two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. **6** “Aaron will present his own bull as a sin offering to purify himself and his family, making them right with the Lord. **7** Then he must take the two male goats and present them to the Lord at the entrance of the Tabernacle. **8** He is to cast sacred lots to determine which goat will be reserved as an offering to the Lord and which will carry the sins of the people to the wilderness of Azazel. **9** Aaron will then

present as a sin offering the goat chosen by lot for the Lord. **10** The other goat, the scapegoat chosen by lot to be sent away, will be kept alive, standing before the Lord. When it is sent away to Azazel in the wilderness, the people will be purified and made right with the Lord.

29 “On the tenth day of the appointed month in early autumn, you must deny yourselves. Neither native-born Israelites nor foreigners living among you may do any kind of work. This is a permanent law for you. **30** On that day offerings of purification will be made for you, and you will be purified in the Lord’s presence from all your sins.

- When this first day of atonement happened, the death of Aaron’s two sons for recklessly approaching God’s presence was still fresh in everyone’s minds.
- The day of atonement was the only day in the year the High Priest (Aaron) could go into the holy place in the Tabernacle where God’s presence resided. Aaron’s fear must have been enormous after the fiery death of his two sons.
- “The word ‘atonement’...means ‘a making at one’...bringing those who are estranged into a unity (reconciliation). God and man, then, are hopelessly estranged by man’s sin, and there is no way back from man’s side. But God provides the way. In the OT atonement is usually said to be obtained by the sacrificesⁱⁱ [Today, atonement speaks to] the work of Christ in dealing with...the sin of man, and in bringing sinners into right relation with God.”ⁱⁱⁱ
- Theologians have many ideas on the meaning of atonement. The prevalent ideas are ransom, sacrifice, reconciliation (with God), and victory (over Satan and sin).^{iv}
- The elaborate rituals and sacrifices prescribed in these verses, show us that atonement and repentance for sin was a BIG DEAL to God and His people.
- The ritual of the “scapegoat” taking on the sins of the Israelites and removing them (v. 10) is a foreshadowing of Christ...^v and what He did on the cross.
- Look again at that last verse (v. 30). How do you think the people of Israel felt when God gave them that assurance, “*you will be purified from all your sins?*”
- We can only imagine the relief and joy they must have felt on that day!
- We can experience the joy of reconciliation with God ANYTIME because when Christ died for sinners, He became our great High Priest giving direct access to our Heavenly Father.
- **Hebrews 4:14–16 (NLT)** — **14** ...since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. **15** This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. **16** So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.
- Question: Why is it hard to say we are sorry? Why is it therapeutic when we do?
- Repentance is not strictly to make us feel bad; it is a path to joy.
- **2 Corinthians 7:10 (ESV)** — **10** For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.
- Godly grief equals salvation without regret; worldly grief equals death.

- Warren Wiersbe wrote: *“The difference (salvation vs death) is seen in Judas and Peter. Judas “repented himself” (was full of regret) and went and committed suicide, while Peter wept and repented of his fall (Matt. 26:75–27:5).”^{vi}*
- Psalm 51 is David’s famous prayer of repentance for his sins of adultery and murder. In verse 4 he felt the weight of his sin.
- **Psalm 51:4 (NLT) — 4** Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight...your judgment against me is just.
- David also knew being sorry for his sin was the path to joy:
- **8** Oh, give me back my joy again; you have broken me— now let me rejoice. **12** Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you.
- How do we know repentance is not out of style for Christians? Ask Jesus.
- **Luke 5:32 (ESV) — 32** I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” That speaks to the repentance that leads to salvation.
- When we look at how Jesus handled the woman about to be stoned for adultery, some in the modern church may focus on His words to the woman: *“Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” “No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I.”^{vii} [That’s not all He said] Go and sin no more.”*
- What about those of us who are already saved? Do we need to repent?
- Wiersbe: *“Four of the seven churches of Asia Minor, listed in Revelation 2–3, were commanded to repent. To repent simply means “to change one’s mind,” and disobedient Christians need to repent, not in order to be saved, but in order to restore their close fellowship with God.”^{viii}*
- As we said, trusting Christ as Savior starts with being sorry for our sin and turning from it (repentance). Living in relationship with Him as Lord requires regular repentance to experience the JOY of forgiveness.
- Why do some see the call for repentance as contrary to celebrating God’s grace?
- How does repentance for sin go hand in hand with God’s grace?
- Trevin Wax writes, *“The call to repentance is the call to return home. It’s the call to be refreshed by our tears. It’s the call to be cleansed from all our guilty stains. We need the scalpel of the Spirit to do surgery on our diseased hearts, so that we can be restored to spiritual health.”^{ix}*

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- Repentance for sin and God’s grace are not opposing ideas, they go hand in hand. Godly sorrow for our sin leads to repentance and a deeper relationship with Jesus.
- Some see sorrow for sin and the need for repentance as harsh.
- James the half-brother of Jesus wrote in **James 4:8–10 (ESV) — 8** Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. **9** Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.
- Wow. That’s a little harsh, right? Being that sorry for my sin might damage my fragile self-image! Look at the promise in the next verse:
- **10** Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.
- Being sorry for our sin isn’t damaging to our psyche, it’s the path to joy!

- Repentance brings joy to Christians by:
 - Restoring fellowship with God, reconnecting us to His presence.
 - Freeing us from guilt and shame, offering peace through forgiveness.
 - Revealing God's mercy and love, assuring us of His grace.
 - Refreshing and renewing our spirit, bringing hope and renewal.
- Though it begins with sorrow over sin, repentance leads to lasting joy through forgiveness and spiritual renewal.
- This week, let's not avoid confession and repentance. Let's celebrate God's forgiveness and rejoice in a restored relationship with Him.

ⁱ <https://www.ajc.org/news/what-is-yom-kippur-and-how-is-it-celebrated>

ⁱⁱ Morris, L. L. (1996). Atonement. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed., p. 102). InterVarsity Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Morris, L. L. (1996). Atonement. In D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, & D. J. Wiseman (Eds.), *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed., p. 102). InterVarsity Press.

^{iv} Brockway, D. (2016). Atonement. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

^v <https://www.gotquestions.org/Azazel-scapegoat.html>

^{vi} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 654). Victor Books.

^{vii} Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Jn 8:10–11). Tyndale House Publishers.

^{viii} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 654). Victor Books.

^{ix} <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/call-repentance-championing-grace/>