

The Language of Faith, Part Four

Speaker: Tim Mackie

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, this is the fourth of a four-part series that represents a teaching series I was a part of at Door of Hope Church, when I served as a teaching pastor there. And in the series, we basically explored some of the most basic words and concepts in Christian belief and biblical faith. And they're words that are either not used anymore in our modern Western culture, or, if they are used, they're used in a new and different way than they are in the Bible, which really doesn't help us when we go back and read the Bible.

And so in this teaching, we're exploring the biblical word and concept of "atonement," which is a hot topic, actually. And I mostly don't wade into the controversies surrounding this word in theological circles. I just, kind of, dive into the biblical text and the biblical story and let it speak for itself. So hopefully this is helpful for you, and let's dive in.

[Musical Break (01:53—02:03)]

For some of us, we've lost a sense of their importance or meaning because we're over-familiar with them. You know, maybe you grew up around Christianity—or "churchianity,"

[Tim laughs] as I sometimes call it. And you know, you just, for a long time, you've been awash in religious vocabulary. And so these words lose their edge and their power from over-familiarity.

There's a whole bunch of you for whom that's—the exact opposite's the case. Where you didn't grow up around that, and following Jesus and being a part of a church community, like, this is a new thing in your life, or a relatively new thing. And so all this vocabulary—this religious vocabulary of Christians—is weird to you. And these words are foreign.

And so this is what we're going to do this fall—it's what we are doing. We've looked at words like “faith” and “freedom.” We've looked at words like “holiness” and “sin.” And today we're going to look at one of the stranger words, at least to modern Western people, in our vocabulary. It's the word “atonement.” The word “atonement.”

You definitely didn't use it in conversation this week [Tim laughs], and you shouldn't feel bad about that because this word comes from a place and a time that's just totally foreign to modern Western culture, or so it seems. We're looking at the word “atonement.”

Here's where we've been: We explored, a couple of weeks ago, the concept of “holiness,” of God's holiness—that God is the unique and one-of-a-kind, “set-apart” being in all of existence, because God has the power and the wisdom and brilliance to generate a universe like ours, like the one that we inhabit. And that's fairly remarkable. I certainly don't have any capability to do something like that. [Tim laughs] I can build Legos with my kids, but I can't generate a universe.

And so one of the core convictions about a Christian's belief in what is reality, and where are we, is: we exist in a world that was brilliantly and lovingly, creatively brought forth, in love from God, the creator. And that God wants to share the beauty of existence with creatures. And that humans have a unique role, in that God has appointed humans, the crown of the species, to manage and oversee this good world, under his care.

And then that moves us into what Josh helped us explore last week, is that: *what have we done with the place?* We were appointed as stewards and managers and overseers of God's good world, and we've become vandals. We've become vandals of God's good world. Through our choices, our behavior, we end up defacing it and introducing ruin into God's good world—ruining ourselves, ruining other people. And that's what this word “sin” is all about.

It's the human condition. It's—somehow, there's something going on inside you and me, individually, and there's something, then, that gets magnified collectively—that we, just, hurt each other. We treat each other with contempt and inappropriately. We violate each other's dignity as images of God. We redefine “right” and “wrong.” We declare

independence from God, and we don't want to submit to his wisdom and holiness. And so we end up with a world that looks like ours.

So the question—the question—is: what is God's response to a world like ours? Like, what is God doing about the evil and the sin that we all participate in and choose and perpetuate on a day-to-day basis, individually and corporately? What is God going to do? And one of the key words—just, one of the most important words in Christian vocabulary—to talk about “what is God doing” about human evil and sin and the death and the ruin that results: *atonement*.

“Atonement” is one of the key words. And so this is a problem because it's one of the most core words to a Christian vocabulary, but none of us use it ever [Tim laughs] in our conversation with each other. And so we really have some remodeling to do of our imaginations, I think, and of our minds.

So here's what I'd like to do. I want you to grab a Bible and turn with me almost to the end—almost to the very end—to the letter of First John. And it's a short, like, four or five pages, almost at the very end of your Bible. Or turn it on—it might be easier to find if you have a digital Bible in your hand—and we're going to look at page one of the letter of First John and explore the significance of this word and its meaning and of the whole story behind it.

I recently heard an illustration that helped me think about this series on the language of faith. These words—these core theology words of Christian faith—are a lot like a suitcase that you take on a trip. When you go on a trip, you are packing everything—let's say you're going for, like, seven days. You're taking all kinds of things—like clothes and, whatever, hygiene stuff and shoes—and you pack it into this dense, little bag. And if you're a cheapskate, like almost all of us are now, [Tim laughs] because of the costs involved in checking a bag, you pack it all in—as much as you can. Then you take it as a carry-on. You stick it up above.

And these words, “holiness, sin, atonement,” they're a lot like that: a tightly packed bag. And the goal is to pack it tight so that you can take it somewhere and quickly get from one place to another. But never mistake the tightly packed bag for everything that's in the bag. You have a week's worth of stuff in there. You have all these different kinds of clothes and toothpaste, or makeup—I don't know, whatever. And so the goal isn't that you keep it in the bag. The goal is that you take it back out again and explore and use everything that's in the bag.

And that's a lot like what a series like this is, you know. Just to hear a short talk—or a long talk [Tim laughs]—on the meaning of the word “atonement”? There's a *universe* inside each of these words, and a whole, long way of thinking about the story of the whole Bible. So I'm going to do my best to condense what is a really complex, heated

topic throughout church history and pack it into a bag for you to open up in your community groups and spin your brain over lunch when you guys leave from here—sound good?

First John—page one of First John. I just want to read, start in verse 5. Chapter 1, verse 5—and we’ll read a couple paragraphs. John says, “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you.” The “him” there is Jesus. This is John, the close follower — disciple of Jesus—[who] followed him around, heard everything he said. “This is what we heard from Jesus, and now we’re going to declare it to you all: God is light. In him there is no darkness at all.

“Now if we claim to have fellowship with him”—a relationship with him—“yet we walk in the darkness, we’re lying, and we don’t live out the truth. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his son, purifies us from all sin. Now, if we claim to be without sin, we’re deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he’s faithful, he’s just, he will forgive us our sins, and he’ll purify us from all unrighteousness.

“If we claim we haven’t sinned, we make him out to be a liar, and his word is not in us. So my dear children, I’m writing this so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father. It’s Jesus, Messiah, the Christ. He’s the righteous one. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins—and not only our sins, actually the sins of the whole world.”

The letter of First John—it’s actually not a letter. It’s not a letter at all—it doesn’t begin like a letter and end like a letter. It’s a written sermon. It’s one of the earliest-written early Christian sermons that we have in the New Testament. And it’s beautifully simple. The sermon is—that we call First John. But its simplicity—it’s one of these things where the words are simple, but there’s a universe of depth underneath them.

There are lots of things we could explore here, but there’s something he repeated *three times* that I hope you noticed, because repetition is one of the key ways you notice what a biblical author is trying to get at. Three times he repeated something about the effect of Jesus’s death—did you catch it? [Referencing visuals] I’ll just—we’ll throw them up there, just in case you missed all three of them.

First of all, he said: so we have this thing called “sin,” right? It’s our vandalism that we introduce into God’s good world. And what does Jesus do about that? Well, first of all, he says: the blood of Jesus purifies us. So the blood here is a shorthand. It’s a metaphor for Jesus’s death—his execution on the cross. It purifies us from our sin.

And then he says it again later, except he adds another word to it. That purification is connected with “forgiveness.” The death of Jesus provides a means of forgiveness, and that forgiveness purifies us. And then the, kind of, the crowning statement in this

paragraph is—he says that, that the death of Jesus, by which we’re forgiven, is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

So three times over, he wants to make really clear: you and I have introduced a whole lot of garbage into this world. In fact, he says: [Tim laughs] if you deny that that’s the case, you really should see a therapist about that. [With a grin] Because you’re living in a state of denial. If you think that you’re not a deeply flawed human who keeps acting out of those flaws—there’s no use denying it. Your friends all notice, and so do your family members—especially during the holidays. So let’s just all own up to the ways that we hurt each other based out of our flaws.

So what is God doing about that? Well, apparently, through Jesus, God wants to forgive and purify, by means of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice—how are you guys doing? Great. I’m just trying to be very clear. There’s a whole bunch of you for whom, “I’m not learning anything right now”—that’s what you’re thinking. And that’s great, because it means you’re familiar with a really important concept of the Christian faith.

Now, so the word “atonement,” this is—“purify,” we kind of get. It’s like what you do to a wound or a cut, or something—you know? Or “purify” is what you do to your bathroom when you clean it, or something like that. You make it sanitary. So maybe “purity” or “pure” fits into your vocabulary somehow. But “atonement”—what on earth?

So let’s just go—first, let’s just go for the English word right here. And the first time someone pointed this out to me, it just made all the sense in the world. Because what on earth does “atone” mean? Or “atonement”? And all you have to do is take the word “exploded out” into its three little root pieces—and do you see it there? [Refers to visuals] Do you see it? I did it for you: “at-one-ment. At-one-ment.” I’m not joking—Oxford English Dictionary [Tim laughs]—“at-one-ment.” Do you get it? Yeah, it’s very simple.

So “atonement,” what this English word means is that you have two people, two parties, and they’re at odds with each other. There’s been some wrong. One person has vandalized another’s property—your life—in some way. There’s been a wrongdoing. And now there’s a mess, right? There’s conflict or tension in the relationship.

And what our English word “atonement” refers to is the means, the way that, that damage or harm is dealt with, so that the two can be made “at one”—*at-one-ment*. You with me? It’s about relational repair and reconciliation between two people who are now suffering from something that one person did to the other. It’s just—there you go.

So all of a sudden, a very strange word becomes, at least, “normal” in terms of its meaning. Like this is a very everyday concept about the repair and the reconciliation of relationships. So the question is, of course: this is an English word, and that’s its English meaning, but was the Bible written in English? Well, you should definitely know

the answer to this one—[Tim laughs] right? You should definitely—was the Bible written in English? It was not. It just wasn't written in English.

The first three-quarters, that we call the “Old Testament,” it's written in, mostly, Hebrew, a little Aramaic in there. And then the New Testament, which was written by Hebrew people, Jewish people, but the language of their day, in the Roman Empire, was Greek. And so the vocabulary that the biblical authors use, that gets translated in our Bibles as “atonement”—“atonement.” It's a good translation, but it doesn't get us all the way there.

What these words mean to John when he uses his Greek word, *hilasmos*—and what he's using there is a word that he learned from reading the Hebrew Scriptures. And what he's doing in his head is translating a Hebrew concept into Greek: *hilasmos*. And that Hebrew concept—how do you want to pronounce the Hebrew word? You want to say “kipper,” don't you?

Just like when you see on your calendar, like you just saw this last week, maybe if you have a religious holiday as part of your calendar, or something, it tells you that the Jewish holiday of what?—just happened last week. Okay, so what you also want to say is “Yom Kippur.” [Tim laughs] You want to say “Yom Kippur,” but don't say that because it makes you sound like you don't know what you're talking about.

So don't say “kipper,” say *kipper*. And then when you see it on your calendar, you say, “Yom Kippur—*kippur*.” *Kipper* is the verb; *kippur* is the noun. Meaning what? And—just because, whatever, I'm a nerd—I've really tried to read as widely, and as much in the meaning and history of this word as possible, because it is super fascinating—and it's important for Christian faith. And the best English word that I can come across—[Tim laughs] I'll probably never sponsor the “Mackie translation,” or something like that, but if I were to ever do that—the word “cover” is the English word that I would advocate for.

And I'm actually not the only Bible nerd who thinks that. There are lots of people smarter than me who think that too. The word “cover”—there's something going on with the English word “cover” that, it's a normal English word, and it hits on way more of what this biblical concept of atonement is: to *cover* for someone's failure.

And because that English word—and the concept of “covering” someone—“I've got you covered”—it does a number of things. We're talking about “erasing” or “taking responsibility” for the consequences of wrongdoing, or “covering a debt.” But it does more than that. “Covering” can also be an image connected with purifying, or restoring, or repairing.

So a silly illustration. So let's say you and I go out to lunch—[With a grin in his voice] such a wonderful world of lunch to be had here in the Portland area, especially ramen. *Ramen*. So let's say you and I go out to the *best* ramen restaurant in Portland—there's

a few locations—and, of course, I’m talking about? Boxer Ramen. People—[Tim laughs] what’s wrong with [Tim laughs]? Boxer Ramen, on Alberta, right downtown.

So Boxer Ramen. And so, whatever, we have wonderful conversation, and it’s really amazing, great food—because you got half tonkatsu and half spicy red miso—one bowl, you can combine the two flavors. So let’s say we have this wonderful lunch, and it’s time—whatever—we have to get back to whatever we’re doing. And so the check comes. And so I look in my pockets, and I’m like, “Dang it, I forgot my wallet. I don’t have my wallet. I don’t have my debit card. I don’t have any cash on me. I’m really sorry.”

So have I failed? Have I failed? Yes. Is it the worst failure that I could commit in a day? No, it’s not. But have I failed? Yes, I have. I failed to remember to bring money to pay for this food. So now you could be a very nice person. You could not say what you’re really thinking, which is: “This absent-minded—whatever—silly person.” Or you could just be, actually, gracious and be like, “Oh yeah, I forget stuff too.” And so you could forgive me. You could say, “Oh, it’s totally fine. I forgive you.”

But then a server is going to come, and then the server will come with a check. And you can tell the server, “Oh, my friend Tim here, he’s absent-minded today. He forgot his wallet. He doesn’t have his debit card, but it’s okay. I forgave him.” [Tim laughs] And the server will say to you—what? “You must be a very nice person. Here’s the check. Who’s going to pay?” Are you with me here?

So like forgiveness—even forgiveness itself is an act that requires “absorbing a cost.” You can say you forgive me. But the failure, and what that failure has produced in the world—right?—this debt that’s now outstanding. It *can’t* be overlooked. It has to be dealt with in some way. And so if you’re actually going to forgive me, you have to *cover* for me—you have to absorb the cost of what my failure has produced. The server doesn’t care if you like me or don’t like me after I forgot my wallet. What the server cares about is: who’s going to cover the actual cost of this meal? Are you with me here? It’s atonement. It’s *covering* for someone.

Now, atonement also does more. Because let’s say, let’s say we go out to lunch every week, for like a month, and I do this every time. [Tim laughs] Right? And then you’re going to start to, like, resent me, right? It’s as if I’m making “toxic” the air, or the atmosphere of the relationship, right? My perpetual failure starts to make you think that I don’t care about you, and I don’t respect you, and I’m just going to *mooch* everything I can off of you, right? It’s like I’m “dirtying the air” of the relationship.

And so atonement both has to cover the hard cost of my failure, but then there also needs to be some resolution of this relational tension and damage that I’m now doing to you because of how I’m treating you. That’s also something that needs to be dealt with.

And in the biblical story and the biblical vocabulary, this is what Jesus's life and death and resurrection do for the problem of human evil and sin. They deal with the *hard* cost. They *cover* the debt, but they do more. They actually *restore* the damaged relationship. That's what's going on here, in this concept of atonement—how are you guys doing?

Okay, now, so where does this word come from? Like, why doesn't John just use "financial," relational vocabulary then? There are perfectly good Greek words for "reconcile." There are perfectly good Greek words for "payback"—[Tim laughs] right? Or to "cover the cost" of.

But instead, John uses this term of "sacrifice"—like animal sacrifice, *atoning sacrifice*—why does he use this vocabulary? And he's not the only apostle—that Jesus commissioned to write and to spread the Good News—that uses this word. Paul the Apostle uses this language. Peter uses this language in his letters. Why does this language of "sacrifice" permeate the New Testament and Christian vocabulary?

And it comes from the fact that Jesus and all of the Apostles—they're Jewish. And they're a part of the history and story of the Israelite people. And this word, *hilasmos*, which they're translating in their heads, right—as Greek speakers and writers—this Hebrew concept of *kipper*, this has a really significant history in the storyline of Israel, and the storyline of the Bible.

And it has to do with a *space*. [Referring to visuals] Let's go to the next slide. It has to do with this space *right here*, and the meaning and significance of this space in the story of the people of Israel. So here's how this story goes, in a nutshell. If you've been around Door of Hope a long time, you're like, "How many sermons has Tim summarized the story of the Old Testament in three to five minutes?" *Almost every one*. And there's a reason—there's a very important strategy behind that.

So here's how the story goes. God wants to deal with and respond to the evil and the sin that's in the world. And so God's first, long-term response happens on "page twelve" of the Old Testament—or Genesis, chapter 12. He chooses a family, the family of Abraham, and through them, he's going to restore blessing and salvation and redemption to all the nations of the world.

And so this family grows through Abraham and his wife, Sarah—becomes a people group. And this people group ends up in slavery down in—what nation? Down in Egypt. Things are not good there. So what God does is he confronts the evil and the collective, corporate evil of Egypt, embodied in the big, bad Pharaoh. And he confronts that. He defeats it, and his people go free into the wilderness.

And then God brings them to the foot of a mountain—Mount Sinai. And there's two key things that happen there. First of all, God enters into a covenant relationship with the whole nation. And he says, "What I said I would do through Abraham—bring blessing

and redemption to all the nations—I'm going to do it through you all. You all are going to be a kingdom of priests, a people set apart, who are going to reflect, as a nation, God's character and his justice and mercy to all of the other nations by how you live as a contrast community.

And then the second thing God says is: he's going to come live in their midst, in this embodied, physical symbol of a space that you're looking at, [referring to visual] right here, called the "tabernacle" in English. And so this was a whole ritual, symbolic space that spoke to the story of God and these people, and of what God wanted to do through these people for the whole world.

And so in this space, you have a big courtyard, with all these stake tents, here, and just—for proportions, whatever. Hopefully you've already read all this stuff, right here. It was really interesting to get a sense of the size. But there's an altar. The big thing is there's an altar right before this tent. And then in front of this sacred tent, you can see it's one long rectangular space.

And the way the rectangle works is: it's divided up into thirds. And the two-thirds space, right here—inside there—you can maybe see what's called a "menorah," a candle stand. All these things have symbolism—beautiful symbolism. And then there's a thick curtain. And then behind the curtain is a golden box, with freaky-looking creatures [Tim laughs] that are on top of these winged, animal-humanoid creatures. And this is all symbolism that fits into Israel's time and culture and space. These were symbols that made sense to them.

But God's invisible presence, symbolized by smoke and cloud, hovered over that golden box. And this was about the gift of God's presence. God wanted to live in the midst of his kingdom of priests—these people that he loved, that he rescued, and that he wants to make into a beacon to all of the nations. And so he comes to live in their midst. Okay, how you guys doing? That's the story so far.

So what God asked the people to do is: live by a different set of standards. And the first one is how they relate to this God. So they're not to try and reduce the creator God, who can generate the universe—they're not to reduce that God and equate that God with any one thing in the creation by, like, making a statue. Almost *all* of Israel's neighbors represented their gods by statues. "Don't do that," [Tim laughs] the God of Israel says, because you're reducing who God is into something that you have made—"so don't do that. And don't give your allegiance to any other gods. I'm the one who rescued you. Love and follow me. Don't represent me with idol statues."

And so they get the blueprints for the making of this tent. [With a grin in his voice] And what's the *first* thing the people of Israel do at the foot of the mountain, right there? They

represent God with a statue, [Tim laughs] and they begin to give their allegiance to other gods—like, right there. It's called "the story of the golden calf," if you don't know.

And so, like, right there, the story is telling us something. It's telling us that there's something about human nature that, even when God reveals his own self to us in a pure, real, tangible form, there's something so broken inside of us that we continue to declare independence from God. And we refuse to submit to God's wisdom and even to His mercy.

Here's where the story lands you. It forces you to ask a question: if you were God, what would you do with these people? Like, you rescued them and they've just thrown it all back in your face—what would you do? Does God have every right to walk out on these people and just leave the relationship? Yes.

Do you have the right to walk out of the restaurant and leave me hanging with this bill that I produced because of my failure? Right? Do you have the right, especially the fourth time it happens? [Tim laughs] Right? Do you have—like, yes, you do. You have every right to just leave me there in the mess that I've made for myself.

But that's exactly what God *doesn't* do. What God does after the story of the golden calf is provide Israel with an *elaborate, elaborate* set of ritual symbols that they're to perform in this space. And these symbols communicate two key things: they tell Israel something about their sin, and they tell Israel something about God.

So what are the rituals, and what are the symbols? *Killing animals*. How are you guys—yeah? Killing animals—that's what that fiery thing is dedicated to, right? So if you read on, the book of Leviticus—like I'm sure all of you love to do, right, on an annual basis—the first seven chapters are taken up with describing the rituals of sacrifice that the Israelites and their priests were to perform.

And so there were five different kinds. Two of them are just to say "thank you." So they're either from your flock or from your field. And if you have an abundant flock, or an abundant harvest, you take the first fruits, or the best of the flock, and you offer it, not for your sins, just to say "thank you" to God. It's like a token "giving back," a symbolic token of just a little bit of what God has given to me, as a way to say "thank you." Two of them are for saying—two different types of offerings are for that.

Three of the types of offerings that you read about in Leviticus are ways of saying, "I'm sorry." And there are different rituals, and they're for different things, and I won't bore you. But the net effect is that: you take this animal—you cheat your neighbor, right?—of the, like, whatever—of a goat, something like that. Or you sleep with your neighbor's wife, or something. You're Moshe, Israelite, or Esther, and you do one of these things—you don't love your neighbor as yourself.

And so you realize what you've done, and you can make it right with that person—right? You can go to Jeremiah, that you cheated him his goat, or whatever, and you can repay him for that. And he can say, "I forgive you." [With a grin] But the "server still comes" and says, "Now who's going to pay?" The God of Israel comes and is like, "You see, you're my people. You're supposed to live as priests of the nations, and this is how you're going to behave?" You haven't just offended your neighbor. You've offended God.

And so what you do is you go—you take an animal—and you go in, and you consult with a priest: "Here's what I've done, here's my offering." And there's going to be a whole set of rituals—but that animal's going to die. Its throat's going to be slit in front of you. Its blood's going to be drained into a bowl. It's going to get cut up—part of it's going to get burned on the altar.

And then, here's what's really interesting. I didn't recognize the significance of this until I started reading *Jewish* scholars on the book of Leviticus—which, to me, is just [Tim laughs] thrilling bedtime reading. I don't know what you think, but there's so much history and meaning to these rituals and these symbols. So here's something you probably didn't know. [Referring to visuals] Let's go to the next slide.

So there were different places where the blood of that animal would get sprinkled, depending on the type of offense and who committed the offense. So if it was just, like, every day Moshe, Israelite, and you cheated your neighbor, or something like that, the blood of that animal gets sprinkled on the altar. But if it's the sin of a whole tribe—a whole group of people has committed sin against another tribe—like, the stakes are higher. You know what I mean? Like if I bail on you for lunch, that's very different than, like, one tribe of, like, Reuben forming a private militia and [going and] killing a bunch of people from another tribe. The stakes are higher—a lot more damage.

And so if that's the kind of thing that is being covered by a sacrifice, then you don't go to "spot number one." You go into the tent, and you sprinkle it in "spot number two," closer to the divine presence, on the altar of incense. And then if the high priest—the person who represents the whole nation of Israel—if he's sinned or failed in some significant way, then how is that supposed to be covered? Because he's, like, representing the whole people before God.

And so he doesn't just go to "spot number one." He doesn't just go to "spot number two." He goes right into the divine presence, and he can only do it "one day a year"—are you with me? So even in Israel's own experience of this, they had this sense: "I've vandalized God's space. When I cheat my neighbor, I'm both hurting my neighbor, but I'm dishonoring the God who rescued us out of slavery," and so on. And so the higher the stakes, the closer the space I need to get to God to cover and deal with this.

So it raises the question then: why does this blood-symbolism—what does it mean, and *why* does an atoning sacrifice work? How does it cover evil? And I put in front of you the key line from the book of Leviticus that unpacks the symbolism, this blood-symbolism. “For the life of a creature is in the blood. I’ve given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar. It’s the blood that covers”—makes atonement for, *kipper*—“it’s the blood that symbolizes life, that covers for your life.” It’s a life covering for another life.

Let’s pause right here. So this is the point—I find it within myself and, in teaching and talking about this with a lot of people over the years, I found—right here is where modern Westerners, we just shut down. This is so foreign to us, so foreign to our concept of the world and “justice,” that what we do—we have this revulsion towards what’s happening here. And sadly, we become the opposite of the open-minded, tolerant people that we say we want to become as a society. And we close our minds to this ancient culture and its symbolism, and we make up a story about it.

And that story goes like this: “Oh yeah, blood. Animal dies.” Okay, we connect it to ancient, pagan notions of, like, Zeus or Apollo or Dionysus. And these gods are—they have as much moral integrity as you and I. [Tim laughs] Right? They’re just glorified humans. And so, you know, these gods—you want to gain their favor, and so on.

And so you offend them in some way, and they’re ticked at you. They hate you, and they’re going to kill you, or send plague on your flocks, or something like that. And so what you need to do is kill this animal, so that it can die instead of the gods killing you. And once the god has their pound of flesh, then they’ll leave you alone and be happy with you.

And what we do is, we read that story onto the story of what’s happening here. And then we bring Jesus into it. And what we end up with is a story that says: God’s perfect—he’s holy and he’s perfect. *You’re not*. So God has to kill you. He has to kill you. He needs his pound of flesh in the name of his justice. And so he’s going to kill you because he’s angry at you. But instead, he’s going to kill Jesus, and he takes out his anger on Jesus. And then he allows you, after you die, to go to “the good place,” and not “the bad place,” so you can sing, forever, the praises of the God who didn’t kill you. How you guys doing?

Now some of you—I’m creating a caricature—but for some of us, you might think, like, “Yeah, isn’t that the story of Christianity? [Tim laughs] Isn’t that what Christians believe?” This is one of those cases where there’s so many distorted—not even half-truths, one-third truths—in what I just described to you, that there’s nothing recognizable of actual Gospel in what I just described to you if you actually *read* what’s in the New Testament. If you read the character of God in the New Testament, if you read the character of God in the Old Testament, you’d be able to spot what I just said to you as a

total distortion and perversion of God's character, and of the Good News, and of the meaning of "atonement." Here's why.

If we could go be Moshe, Israelite, and offer this animal, you would realize that little summary right there is the exact *opposite* of what Moshe or Esther, Israelite, is experiencing when they go offer their animal. As they go offer that animal, there's two main things that, if you study Leviticus, emerge out of it. The symbolism tells us something about our sin, and the symbolism tells us something about God.

If I cheat my neighbor, and I recognize that's lame, I really shouldn't have done that—but then I go, and I have to take an animal from my flock, and then I watch its throat be slit—you know? And I'm watching its blood get drained, and it's gasping, and—you know, I didn't grow up on a farm, and so I'm not used to this kind of experience. Many people do. And so I'm sure you can get used to slaughtering chickens—[Tim laughs] you know? I'm sure you could become desensitized to even watching an animal get slaughtered in front of you.

But to have this visual symbol—it's a *symbol*—and it's a symbol that says something about what happened when I cheated my neighbor. It says that my moral actions have *real* consequences, and that the stakes are high. When I vandalize my neighbor, when I strip them of their dignity as a human who reflects the image of God, and I don't love them as myself, I'm introducing death into the world—*death*.

And it's exactly what was going on in Jesus's mind when he talked about, "Okay, let's say you obey the commandment, 'do not murder.'" But then, where does Jesus take it? He takes it deep inside, to issues of pride and contempt. And he talks about murder that takes place *in the heart*. And that, when I elevate myself above another person, and I view people who aren't like me with contempt, and then when I verbally abuse them—when they're not around me, [Tim laughs] of course. Or maybe I even do it when they are around me. He says the same issues are happening inside. They are the same things that go into murder—it's just a little bit more progressed.

This symbolism communicates to me that when I behave—when I fail, when I sin—I'm introducing *death* into God's good world. Because you take one prideful human who thinks they're better than everybody else, but you put them in a tribe, you multiply that person by a million, and then, all of a sudden, we are better, and our well-being is way more important than that tribe's well-being. And then we get into a fight over resources like water, or something like that. What's going to happen? We're going to kill each other. We're going to kill each other.

The brokenness and the distortion of the human heart—sin—creates *death* in God's good world. And this animal dies to tell me that the stakes are so high, that my moral choices matter, that my sin fractures relationships. It's the death of healthy relationships.

It ruins myself, and it ruins God's good world. The stakes are high. That's what this symbolism—"the life is in the blood"—a life covers for a life.

But the fact that it's covering for my life also tells me, not just something about my sin, it tells me something about God. If God wanted to kill me—if God actually hated me and wanted to kill me, can God simply do that? Yes. [Tim laughs] If God was actually just super angry and uptight, and wanted to walk out on Israel, could God have done that and been in the right? Partially, yes. Yeah.

But also he wouldn't have been in the right if he walked out on Israel. And also God wouldn't be in the right if he just killed you. Because God made a promise. He made a promise to Abraham. He made a promise to the people of Israel. He made a promise to King David that, somehow, instead of wiping out human beings, he was going to commit to saving them and restoring them and healing them and redeeming them. And if God goes back on his promise, then he is not good, and he's not just.

And so, it's this paradox of God's justice, and his love in the Bible is that God has committed himself to saving the human family through a human family—the family of Israel. And that whole story comes to its culmination in the person of Jesus. And so for these Israelites, every time you go and you offer this animal, [with excitement] what you're reminded of is not that God is angry at you—it's the exact opposite.

"God gave me this whole ritual symbolism to remind me that he *loves* me. He doesn't want to kill me—because God could just do that if God wanted to. So what God has done is: he's given me this elaborate symbolism here"—to sink into the psyche of the people of Israel and everyone that participated, "God loves us. He's not going to give up on us. Our moral choices have real consequences and the stakes are so high, because our failure actually creates death in God's good world. But God loves us. He doesn't *want* to kill us. And so he's given us this life to cover for my failure and my sin"—how you guys doing?

The meaning of this symbol is the exact *opposite* of the "bloodthirsty" God, who hates you and wants to kill you. The fact that you're offering the animal [Tim laughs] in the place of your life because God told you to do it means that he loves you and he's trying to show you that he wants to cover for you in some way.

And so you fast-forward to the story of Jesus, and you have John—and he met Jesus of Nazareth, who's saying that "the kingdom of God is here." And despite the whole history of human failure and evil and death, he has come as the high priest—as the messianic king—who's going to *be* the human that you and I are all created and called to be, but perpetually fail to be. And he's going to die and absorb into himself the consequences, and the effect, of all of the evil that you and I have released into the world and participate in, and he's going to conquer it with his love, with his resurrection life.

And this is why, when the Apostles use the word “atonement” in the New Testament to talk about Jesus, they do *not* depict an angry God. For them, when they think of “atonement,” they think of God’s love. Two pages later, in First John, this is the second time John uses the word “atonement.” It’s in First John, chapter 4—and we’ll, kind of, land the plane with this.

He says, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God, and knows God. Whoever does not love God doesn’t know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only son into the world that we might *live* through him. You see, this is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us. And he sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God has so loved us, we also ought to love”—[referring to visual] oh, I forgot that one, to make it yellow—“we also ought to love one another. No one’s ever seen God. But if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us.”

What’s the key word in this paragraph? [Tim laughs] Talk about repetition. When the apostle John thinks of Jesus dying as a sacrifice that covers for our sin, he believes this shows, loud and clear, that this is a revelation of God’s—what? His *anger*? That he hates you and that he wants to kill you, because you failed? Do you see how distorted that idea is? It’s the exact opposite. It’s the exact opposite.

He loves you. He could walk out on you, but he promised that he wouldn’t. And the way that promise finds its most beautiful fulfillment is in God’s becoming human, to be the human that I could never be for myself, so that I can become the kind of human that I could never become in my own power. It’s a revelation of God’s love. That God would cover for us in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus is the supreme embodiment of God’s love.

God doesn’t hate you, and he doesn’t want to kill you. He loves you. Despite your deepest flaws and failures—in your worst moments, God loves you. You’re made for a purpose, and we fail to attain that purpose. God loves you. And how do you know that? How do you know that God—how do you know that there exists a being in the universe whose beautiful mind generated all of this, and despite my deepest flaws and failures, that being loves me?

And John doesn’t say, “feel the warm fuzzy,” and that’s how you know. What he says is: look at the historical event of the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and you will discover that God loves you because he covered for you. For many of us, we’re not learning anything intellectually right now. This all feels very familiar. But odds are, in your moments of deepest failure, this is a very hard thing.

[EMSB theme fades in]

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[EMSB theme fades out]