

Lecture 5: The Golden Calf, the Tabernacle, and the Blood of Atonement

Introduction to Biblical Theology · Dr. Thomas Schreiner · The Master's Seminary · 26 minutes

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Before you watch

The covenant is barely made before it is broken. Dr. Schreiner faces the old covenant's defect, a delivered but largely unregenerate people, then follows God's answer: a tent where his presence dwells, a book that teaches how sinners can live near a holy God, and blood that carries a life surrendered in the sinner's place. Listen for why the fulfillment always outgrows the pattern, and for what the two goats together preach.

The lecture, section by section

1. A gracious covenant, wholly conditional

The Abrahamic covenant, Schreiner has argued, is ultimately unconditional with conditional elements. The Mosaic covenant is different: wholly conditional, and yet still gracious, because God loved his people and brought them out of Egypt before he asked anything of them. Grace came first; the covenant's blessings still depended on Israel's keeping of it.

2. The covenant's defect: a delivered, unregenerate people

Most of Israel left Egypt physically delivered but not spiritually transformed. That typological difference is crucial. God elected Israel as a nation, a theocratic people, and yet not everyone in the elect nation was saved. The new covenant community is different in kind: its members come from every tribe and tongue, and everyone truly within it is elect and saved. So the appeal some make to Israel's apostasy, to argue that new covenant believers can likewise fall away, misses the discontinuity biblical theology itself supplies.

3. The letter kills

Give the law to people without the Spirit and it kills them; that is the story as well as Paul's summary. When the law lands on an unregenerate heart it condemns rather than transforms. Israel's stiff neck is another way of saying that most of the nation was unregenerate.

4. Regenerate but not indwelt

Were any in Israel born again? Schreiner thinks so, and commends Jim Hamilton's book arguing that Old Testament saints were regenerated but not yet indwelt: the Spirit gave life throughout salvation history, while the abiding gift of the indwelling Spirit awaited Christ's resurrection and ascension, as John the Baptist's words and John 16 suggest. He is candid that good people read it differently, John Piper among them, and that the question is not an easy one.

5. The golden calf: broken at the signing

Israel has just said that all the LORD has spoken they will do, and the ink of the covenant, so to speak, is not yet dry when they make the calf. Moses shatters the tablets: the covenant is broken the moment it is made. It is then renewed, new tablets brought down, but the lesson stands. The people are unregenerate, and something eschatological is needed, an intervention of the Spirit, which is exactly what the new covenant will bring. The defects lie in the covenant people, never in God; this was his plan.

6. The tabernacle: God's presence with his people

What is the tabernacle about? The presence of God dwelling among his people. Psalm 84 breathes it: how lovely is your dwelling place. Schreiner commends Ryan Lister's study tracing the theme of the divine presence through Scripture, a book he wrote the foreword for.

7. Reading the furniture

The tabernacle's furnishings preach. The altar of incense is like the cloud of God's presence in the wilderness, God near and yet veiled, immanence and transcendence together. The fire on the altar speaks of God as a consuming fire. The cherubim mark the place where God rules.

8. A map of the cosmos

The compartments of the tabernacle are designed to prevent any casual eruption of the profane into the sacred: outer court, holy place, most holy place. And there is good reason to read them as a picture of the world itself: the outer court as the earth, the holy place as the skies, the most holy place as the dwelling of God. The tabernacle is a representation of the cosmos, God's presence set in the midst of his world.

9. From tent to temple to Jesus to new creation

Read canonically, the trail runs forward. Jesus identifies himself as the temple; the church becomes his temple; and in Revelation 21 and 22 there is no temple in the city, for God and the Lamb are its temple. The New Jerusalem is a cube, the very shape of the holy of holies, which Schreiner reads as richly symbolic: the whole new creation has become the most holy place, indwelt by God. What began as one small tent ends as everything.

10. Typology always escalates

The pattern holds across the Bible: correspondence, and then escalation. Jesus is greater than the tabernacle and the temple; his sacrifice is greater than every animal ever offered. The fulfillment is always greater than the type.

11. Leviticus: how the presence is kept

Exodus ends with the glory of God filling the tabernacle; Leviticus answers the question that creates: how can that presence be maintained among a sinful people? Its key note is the holiness of the LORD, and its heart is Leviticus 26:12, God walking among his people as their God, words Paul takes up in 2 Corinthians 6. The phrase tent of meeting runs through the book, the happiness and wonder of the Lord's presence, a presence so holy that people either retreat from it in dread or bow before it in contrite worship. The book then turns to its cleanness laws, food and skin and discharge, all part of life ordered around that presence. Schreiner warmly commends Michael Morales' study of Leviticus in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series.

12. Strange fire and the seriousness of sin

Nadab and Abihu offer unauthorized fire and are consumed: God's presence cannot be approached casually. Even Moses and Aaron, godly men, are kept from the land for their sin. Sin defiles, God is infinitely holy, and the sacrifices are given precisely so that such a people can go on living in the midst of such a God.

13. Blood, substitution, and the two goats

The pouring out of blood signifies a life surrendered, which is to say death, not some mystical release of life-force. The sacrifices are representative and substitutionary: the worshiper's hand on the animal's head transfers sin, so that what happens to the animal is what should have happened to the worshiper, and the offering quiets the righteous anger of God. Penal substitution is not a later invention; it stands in the Old Testament itself, however contested it is today. Leviticus 16, the Day of Atonement, gathers it all: one man, one day a year, into the most holy place, and two goats that together preach the atonement's two sides, the sacrificed goat bearing death in the sinner's place, and the goat sent to the wilderness carrying sin away into the realm of death and chaos. Death and removal, propitiation and expiation. And the animals never ultimately forgave: if righteousness could come through the law, Christ died for nothing. Every altar in Israel pointed forward, to the servant of Isaiah 53 and the cross.

Scripture in this lecture

Exodus 32, 40; Leviticus 10, 16, 26; Psalm 84; Isaiah 53; John 16; 2 Corinthians 3, 6; Galatians 2; Revelation 21,
22

Key terms

Wholly conditional, still gracious

The Mosaic covenant's shape: deliverance and love came first, yet its blessings depended on Israel's keeping of it.

Regenerate but not indwelt

The view that Old Testament saints were born again while the abiding gift of the Spirit awaited Christ's exaltation; good men differ on it.

The letter kills

Law without the Spirit, landing on an unregenerate heart, condemns rather than transforms.

Typological escalation

The fulfillment always exceeds the pattern: Jesus greater than the tabernacle, his sacrifice greater than every animal offered.

Propitiation

The sacrifice's quieting of God's righteous anger: the worshiper's hand transferring sin, the animal dying the worshiper's death.

The two goats

Leviticus 16's double picture of atonement: death borne in the sinner's place, and sin carried away into the wilderness.

Comprehension check

Circle your answers, then check them against the key on the last page.

1. How does the Mosaic covenant differ from the Abrahamic?
 - A. Both are wholly unconditional
 - B. The Mosaic is wholly conditional while the Abrahamic is ultimately unconditional
 - C. The Abrahamic alone is conditional
 - D. They are identical in structure
2. What defect does the lecture name in the old covenant people?
 - A. They lacked a written law
 - B. They had no priesthood
 - C. Most were delivered from Egypt but never born again
 - D. They spoke many languages
3. Why can Israel's apostasy not prove that new covenant believers fall away?
 - A. The new covenant community is different in kind: everyone truly in it is elect and saved
 - B. Israel never actually apostatized
 - C. Believers are unable to sin
 - D. The old covenant had no elect people
4. What happens when the law meets an unregenerate heart?
 - A. It gradually improves the person
 - B. It leaves the person unchanged
 - C. It kills, for the letter without the Spirit condemns
 - D. It saves through sincere effort
5. What does Jim Hamilton's book argue about Old Testament saints?
 - A. They were indwelt exactly as believers are now
 - B. They were neither regenerate nor indwelt
 - C. They were sinless
 - D. They were regenerated, while the abiding indwelling awaited Christ's exaltation

6. What did Moses' shattering of the tablets signify?
 - A. His sinful anger
 - B. The covenant was broken the moment it was made
 - C. The law was abolished forever
 - D. New tablets were impossible
7. What is the tabernacle fundamentally about?
 - A. God's presence dwelling with his people
 - B. Israel's wealth and craftsmanship
 - C. Military organization
 - D. The calendar of festivals
8. In the cosmos reading of the tabernacle, the most holy place represents what?
 - A. The sea
 - B. The mountains of Israel
 - C. The dwelling place of God
 - D. Egypt left behind
9. Why is the New Jerusalem a cube?
 - A. Cubes were the easiest shape to describe
 - B. It carries the dimensions of the holy of holies: God indwelling the whole new creation
 - C. John measured it from a distance
 - D. It mirrors Babylon's walls
10. What does the pouring out of blood signify?
 - A. A magical power residing in blood
 - B. A ritual washing
 - C. The innocence of the animal
 - D. A life surrendered in death, given in the sinner's place
11. What do the two goats of Leviticus 16 together portray?
 - A. Both sides of the atonement: death in the sinner's place and sin carried away
 - B. Two kinds of sin
 - C. Israel and the nations
 - D. Priest and king
12. Could animal sacrifices ultimately forgive sins?
 - A. Yes, completely
 - B. Yes, but only unintentional sins
 - C. No: they pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ, without which they were nothing
 - D. Scripture does not say

Talk it over

1. Israel said that all the LORD had spoken they would do, and the calf stood finished before the tablets came down. Where do you lean on resolve in a place only a new heart can reach, and what does the new covenant

offer there instead?

2. Leviticus holds together the happiness of God's presence and the terror of it: people either retreat in dread or bow in contrite worship. Which way do you drift, and what would contrite worship look like for you this week?

3. The worshiper's hand on the animal's head said: this death should be mine. How does seeing substitution already in Leviticus change the way you confess sin and receive forgiveness?

One verse to carry

Leviticus 26:12, the promise at the heart of the book: God walking among his people, their God, and they his very own.

Go further

Two books the lecture warmly commends: Michael Morales on Leviticus, in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series, and Ryan Lister's study of the divine presence, for which Dr. Schreiner wrote the foreword. Jim Hamilton's book on regeneration and indwelling stands behind the lecture's answer about the Spirit and the Old Testament saints.

Lecture 5 Comprehension Check

1. B. The Mosaic is wholly conditional while the Abrahamic is ultimately unconditional (*outline section 1*)
2. C. Most were delivered from Egypt but never born again (*outline section 2*)
3. A. The new covenant community is different in kind: everyone truly in it is elect and saved (*outline section 2*)
4. C. It kills, for the letter without the Spirit condemns (*outline section 3*)
5. D. They were regenerated, while the abiding indwelling awaited Christ's exaltation (*outline section 4*)
6. B. The covenant was broken the moment it was made (*outline section 5*)
7. A. God's presence dwelling with his people (*outline section 6*)
8. C. The dwelling place of God (*outline section 8*)
9. B. It carries the dimensions of the holy of holies: God indwelling the whole new creation (*outline section 9*)
10. D. A life surrendered in death, given in the sinner's place (*outline section 13*)
11. A. Both sides of the atonement: death in the sinner's place and sin carried away (*outline section 13*)
12. C. No: they pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ, without which they were nothing (*outline section 13*)